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ROBERT BROWNING
THE POET AND THE MAN

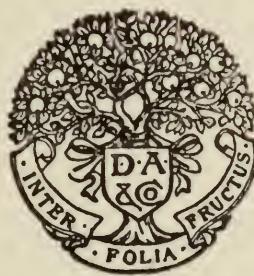
1833—1846

ROBERT BROWNING THE POET AND THE MAN

1833-1846

BY

FRANCES M. SIM



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ROBERT BROWNING

CHAPTER I “PAULINE”

First acknowledged work of Browning—Issued anonymously at expense of an aunt—Poetic autobiography—Recalled and suppressed by author—Acknowledgment compelled later, as pirated editions threatened—Mood of poem became distasteful to poet—Included in collected works with reluctance.

ROBERT BROWNING was born at Camberwell, a suburb of London, on May 7th, 1812,

Of his birthplace no trace is to be found : the early home in Southampton Street seems to have been swept away in the march of London's expansion, and the Camberwell of to-day is still less like the region of romance which Browning recalled, yet in poor old Camberwell lay the romantic region of his soul, Browning ever declared.

The only memorial of Browning's early life there is Browning Hall, once York Street Independent Chapel, where the Browning family worshipped, where he and his sister—two years younger than himself—were christened. Browning Hall ; the house at Warwick Crescent, where he lived till 1887, his sister joining him on the death of their father in 1866 ; and the house in De Vere Gardens at Kensington, are three points of interest for the Browning lover. “The house in Warwick Crescent was an ordinary London house, but the carved oak furniture and tapestries gave dignity to the long drawing-room, and pictures and books lined the stairs,” writes Lady Ritchie,

In 1887 a move was made to a more commodious residence in De Vere Gardens, Kensington. To this home he was borne from Venice in 1889, thence to his last resting-place, the Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey.

The first poem in the edition of Browning's works issued in 1863 is "Pauline : a Fragment of a Confession." It has a Preface, written by Browning :

"The first piece in the series I acknowledge and retain with extreme repugnance, indeed purely of necessity, for not long ago I inspected one, and am certified of the existence of other transcripts, intended sooner or later to be published abroad. By forestalling these I can at least correct some misprints (no syllable is changed) and introduce a boyish piece of work with an exculpatory word. The thing was my earliest attempt at 'poetry always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons not mine,' which I have since written according to a scheme less extravagant and scale less impracticable than this crude preliminary sketch. It was written in pursuance of a foolish plan which occupied me mightily for a time, and which had for its object the enabling me to assume, and realise, I know not how many different characters—meanwhile the world was never to guess that Brown, Smith, Jones, and Robinson (as the spelling books have it), the respective authors of this poem, the other novel, such an opera, such a speech, etc., were not other than one and the same individual. The present abortion was the first work of the Poet of the batch, who would have been more legitimately myself, than most of the others, but I surrounded him with all manner of (to my then notion) poetical assurances, and had planned quite a delightful life for him.

"Only this crab remains of the shapely Tree of Life in this Fool's Paradise of mine.—R. B."

The poem of "Pauline" was published in 1833, but was recalled from the printers, and banished from notice by Browning, almost as soon as printed, and consigned to oblivion for ever, as he hoped; but pirated editions began to threaten about 1863, and he was compelled to own to the authorship of it. Of "Pauline" John Mill wrote :

"With considerable poetic powers the writer seems to me to be possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in a sane human being."

Of the poem of “Pauline,” one of Browning’s boyhood friends wrote :

“It is a strange, wild, and in parts singularly magnificent poet-biography, his own early life as it presented itself to his own soul: in fact, psychologically speaking, his ‘Sartor Resartus.’”—*Letter of Joseph Arnould to Alfred Domett, 1847.*

Browning’s schooldays, to which he refers with contempt in the poem of “Pauline,” were spent as a weekly boarder, from the age of eight or nine, at the preparatory school of the Rev. Mr. Ready—first under the Misses Ready, then, till the age of fourteen, under the Rev. Mr. Ready himself. He looked back upon his schooldays with great distaste; he was unluckily precocious, he believed he owed nothing to the school, and evaded lessons, and was insubordinate and wilful, but obtained favour, by reason of his being able to amuse the master by his caricatures, bits of verse, and schoolboy plays. Here, he writes in “Pauline,” he lost himself, he hated to remember the time; here he first learned to turn his mind against himself, and the effects were “cunning, envy, falsehood.” They were days of repression of his imagination, cramping of intellect, to which he could never look back with tolerance; he referred in later life to this period as one of undiluted misery.

Domett, in his diary, records the early unhappiness, and the jealousy rather than admiration of him among his schoolfellows. He made no outstanding school friend, and looked back upon the time with the resentment and bitterness pictured in “Pauline,” when to his acute sensitiveness of conscience he seemed, on looking back, to have been given over to everything that was souldeadening and curbing to the imagination.

The poem of “Pauline” reviews these childish school-days of Browning, which he declared he could not think of without disgust; but it was rather the restraint put

upon his imagination than real unkindness which the poem relates.

From his fourteenth to his sixteenth year he studied at his home with music and French masters ; a month after his sixteenth birthday he entered London University, now called University College, in Gower Street. At that time Oxford and Cambridge Universities were closed to Dissenters and the children of Dissenters ; until 1854 no Dissenters could take a degree.

The new London University was instituted in 1825 ; it was to be unsectarian, less costly, and home life was allowed to its students.

Browning's father was one of the promoters, guaranteeing £100 towards its maintenance, and " Robert Browning, aged 16, address Hanover Cottage, Southampton Row, Camberwell," was among the earliest students to be enrolled.

He was entered for Greek, German, and Latin ; he was non-resident, and lodgings were taken for him near by at Bedford Square.

One week of this experience of boarding in Bedford Square was enough—it is this stage of his life that the poem of " Pauline " recalls in the lines that he was—

" Lonely for green woods and fields amid dullest sights
Who should be loose as a stag."

But although the experiment of boarding near the University was given up, and he went back to his home, he continued at University College as a student for a term and a half, leaving abruptly during the second term : he then entered at Guy's Hospital, pursuing lectures there for a short time.

" At this period of his life," his sister reported to Mrs. Orr, " he became impatient and aggressive, thought himself unappreciated, set judgments of others at defiance, and gratuitously proclaimed himself everything that he was and some things that he was not. At this time he pronounced

himself an atheist, and as Shelley's ‘ Queen Mab ’ had an article attached to it on the physical and moral advantages of vegetarianism, he, for two years, lived on bread and potatoes, thereby injuring his health, which brought him back to a more robust diet.”—“ *Life of Browning*, ” by Mrs. Orr.

Writing of Shelley many years later, Browning alluded to the state of crude revolt and unbelief of boys, which he thought should be pardoned as growing pains, accompanied by temporary disturbances of the soul also : “ These passionate impatient struggles of a boy towards distant truth and love must not be confounded with genuine infidelity.”

The poem of “ Pauline ” was written before the poet had “ found himself,” before his genius had crystallised ; it was altogether foolish and not boy-like, he wrote to Miss Barrett, when she urged her natural desire to see it ; it was ambiguous, feverish, he assured her. There is no evidence that Miss Barrett ever saw the poem of “ Pauline.”

In his confession to “ Pauline ” the poet holds up the mirror to his past life of twenty years. The primary emotion was a burst of gratitude to Shelley, whose poetry had drawn the depths of his own soul at sixteen years of age. His childhood's idol had been Byron, but love for Shelley and Keats displaced this idol of his boyish imagination, together with his early childish faith in the Christ of Olivet, disturbed by Voltaire and Morot in the course of his French studies.

This burst of love and gratitude to Shelley ; that swell of soul when, as he recorded later in the poem of “ Paracelsus,” “ the waters of my life outburst,” at the divining rod of the poetry of Shelley and Keats ; that response of spirit to the spirit of Shelley and Keats, as he found in them his own fancies justified, his own imaginings recorded : in swelling gratitude his soul arose to exclaim to Shelley :

" Sun-treader! Live thou for ever,
And be to all what thou hast been to me."

This influence of poetry to quicken the soul was fact of experience to Browning; he believed that poetry should do for all what it had done for him. At the time of writing "Pauline," love for, and gratitude to, Shelley was an obsession with him. To his wondering mind this curious exaltation raised by the poetry of Shelley and Keats seemed the compulsion of the dead poets pressing him to their service to carry on the message their young lives failed to utter.

In the poem of "Pauline," Browning looks back with passionate regret at the loss of the simple Christian faith of his childhood; he feels aged in emotion—a feverish literary past had swept over him, young as he was; he mocks at his own ambition to rise and express the thronging ideas within him, derides his ambition now to rival his soul's idol—Shelley himself.

With Shelley, he knew that divinity, that imaginative spell, that

" Awful loveliness whom Spirit fair thy spells did bind
To fear himself and love all human kind."

" But God, the God of his childhood was gone:—
Some dark spirit sitteth in his seat."

Power was there in the void, but Love was gone. The early childish passion that had held him beside the tomb of "Him of weeping Olivet" was gone, nothing of it remained to him, the beauty was gone; he saw only there now:

" A scene of degradation, ugliness, and tears,
A sullen page in human chronicles
Best forgotten."

His early faith of a Christ in the void is gone, he now reaches but for the shadowy hand of Shelley out in the dark; it alone promises him support and beckons him on. As he avows his loss of faith he longs but to regain it, he

pledges himself to give all earth's reward could he but regain his early faith—he longs to “believe again and humbly teach the faith.”

“Why have I girt myself with this hell-dress? why have I laboured to put out my life?” writes Pauline’s lover in distress :

“ Is it not in my nature to adore,
 And e'en for all my reason do I not
 Feel him, and thank him and pray to him—now?
 Can I forgo the trust that he loves me?
 Do I not feel a love which only One—
 O thou pale form, so dimly seen, deep-eyed!
 I have denied thee calmly—do I not
 Pant when I read of thy consummate power,
 And burn to see thy pure truths out-flash
 The brightest gleams of earth's philosophy?
 . . . Oft have I stood by thee—
 Have I been keeping lonely watch with thee
 In the damp night by weeping Olivet,
 Or leaning on thy bosom, proudly less,
 Or dying with thee on the lonely cross,
 Or witnessing thine outburst from the tomb.
 A mortal sin's familiar friend, doth here
 Avow that he will give all earth's reward,
 But to believe and humbly teach the faith,
 In suffering and poverty and shame,
 Only believing he is not unloved.”

“O God! where do they tend, these struggling aims?” exclaims Pauline’s lover : “What is it I hunger for but God!”

Despairingly he reviews his past of imaginative delight :

“ I knew not then
 What whispered in the evening and spoke out at midnight—
 That breath so light—that spirit to which I turned,
 Scarce consciously as turns a water snake when fairies cross
 his sleep.”

He looks back with passionate regret to his glow of faith of early childhood; he feels aged in emotion, worn with thought, mocked at by ambition, fevered with desire to rise and express the thronging ideas within him. Mind

derides his hopes, a restless passion for knowledge alone leads him on ; his bright imagination eats at his soul, but the visible beauty of the world alone enthrals him ; he longs to seclude himself into solitary places, to shut his rapture away from the world.

Imagination is his secret solace : " An angel to me coming not in fitful visions, but beside me ever and never failing me."

Pauline's lover is soul hungry ; he yearns for something more than Art, or mind ; some compulsion above himself other than the magic of spring or effulgence of summer ; above the witchery of flowing water, the sublimity of the midnight, the overflowing of gold into the world morning and evening, the cold, grey spell of the dawn.

The restless egoism of his intellect consumes him. Mind turns in upon itself, intellect seems the only god, but from the myriad-chambered brain despair echoes, from his tortured soul comes appeal for help to realise the powers chained within him, some outside reinforcement of himself to lift him out of himself, out of this consuming egoism that walls his powers within his being. He craves for more light, reaches out for further love, hungers for more faith ; in Art alone he finds relief in expressing these outreaching emotions ; by Art alone he hopes to be happy : to display the power of his mind, to test his imaginative flight, he apostrophises Andromeda. This print of the legend of " Perseus and Andromeda " was always before him as he wrote at this time ; his " beloved Andromeda " was an engraving by Corregio which captured his imagination as his father related the old legend. It was his belief that it inspired his Art; to it he gave the display of imaginative power which symbolised his own attitude of soul at the time of writing " Pauline " :

" Andromeda with eyes upturned, secure some God
To save will come in thunder from the stars."

The poem of " Pauline " is purely confessional, wrote

Mr. Fox in a review of it, for his magazine the *Monthly Repository*:

“ The annals of a poet’s mind are poetry:—the poet himself is, or has been, all that he truly and touchingly, *i.e.*, poetically, describes. The poem in which a great poet should reveal the whole of himself to mankind would be a study, a delight, and a power for which there is yet no parallel. Wordsworth never carried a pedlar’s pack, nor did Byron ever command a pirate ship, or Coleridge shoot an albatross, but there were times and moods in which their thoughts intently realised and identified themselves with the reflective Wanderer, the impetuous Corsair and the Ancient Mariner—we have never read anything so purely confessional. The whole composition is of the spirit spiritual. The scenery is in the chambers of thought; the agencies are powers and passions; the events are transitions from one state of spiritual existence to another. In recognising a poet we cannot stand upon trifles. Archimedes in the bath had many particularities to settle about specific gravities and Hiero’s crown, but he first gave a glorious leap and shouted ‘ Eureka.’ ”

The poem of “ Pauline,” when printed, was labelled “ Richmond” and dated October 22nd, 1832, and, in a note in his own copy, the information is given by Browning how it came to be written. He and his cousin James Silverthorne had walked over to Richmond to the theatre there, to see Edward Kean act in “ Richard III.” “ That night I conceived the scheme of writing ‘ Pauline’ and other works. I don’t know whether I had not made up my mind to act as well as to make verses, music, and God knows what—que de Chateux en Espagne.”

An aunt, the mother of James Silverthorne and sister of Mrs. Browning, gave him thirty pounds to print the poem with when she heard he had written it. It cost £26 5s. to print—the remainder was to be used in advertising it.

Why “ Pauline” was recalled from the publishers and stowed in the house-top, as Browning declared to Miss Barrett it was when she asked in 1845 for a copy, we can but conjecture. He believed he had swept it out of public recognition for ever, and drew upon it for many phrases,

even to the extent of whole lines, for "Paracelsus," his next work. What the aunt thought who gave the thirty pounds for its publication, is not recorded.

In the poem of "Pauline" is placed the romantic passion of Browning's boyhood and early adolescence for his music mistress, Miss Eliza Flower. To her it addresses itself; it recalls her advice to him, her encouragement of him, her opinion upon his work; how she declared that "a perfect bard was one who chronicled the stages of all life":

" And so thou badst me shadow this first page.
 'Tis done, and even now I recognise
 The shift, the change from last to past discern
 Faintly how life is truth and truth is good."

He craves her approval:



" Words are wild and weak,
 But what they would express is, Leave me not,
 Still sit by me with beating heart and hair
 Loosened, be watching earnest by my side,
 Turning my books, or kissing me when I
 Look up—like summer wind! Be still to me
 A help to music's mystery which mind fails
 To fathom, its solution no mere clue!
 Of reasons pedantry, life's rule prescribed!
 I hopeless, I the loveless, hope and love."

There were but three criticisms of "Pauline": that of Mr. Fox; that of Miss Sarah Flower, also published in the *Monthly Repository*; and a third by some journalist of the time on the staff of the *Literary Gazette*, which appeared March 23rd, 1833, father of the brood of hasty journalistic criticism to follow:

" ' Pauline: a Fragment of a Confession.' Somewhat mystical, somewhat poetical, somewhat sensual, and not a little unintelligible—this is a dreamy volume, without an object, and unfit for publication."

CHAPTER II

"PAULINE" (Continued)

Identity of lady addressed as Pauline—Particulars of Eliza Flower, Sarah Flower Adams, Rev. W. Johnston Fox, M.P.—Review of hymn, “Nearer, my God, to Thee,” and monograph on the MSS. deposited in British Museum—Contributions of Browning over signature “Z.”

THE person addressed as Pauline in the first poem of Browning's collected edition of his works, was Miss Eliza Flower. “If any woman inspired the poem of ‘Pauline,’ it was Miss Flower,” says Mrs. Sutherland Orr, Browning's first biographer, who was an intimate friend of Miss Browning, from whom particulars for her biography were gleaned: “He could never hear Eliza Flower's name mentioned without emotion,” reported his sister; “his early passion remained an active sentiment of regard all through his life.”

Eliza Flower was Browning's music teacher in boyhood. She was nine years his senior, and it was with her that the mother of Browning took counsel upon the question of publishing her son's verses. After consultation Miss Flower transcribed a number into a booklet under the title of “*Incondita.*” This she submitted to the Rev. William Johnson Fox, Unitarian Minister of South Place Chapel, Finsbury, and editor of the *Monthly Repository*, the literary organ of Unitarianism.

The advice of Mr. Fox was unfavourable to the publication of the little book, the work of Browning at twelve years of age. Byron was then his model and hero, his first poetic love.

It was with Miss Flower and her sister Sarah, known

later as Sarah Flower Adams, that the young poet went picnics, discussed the Voltairean problems raised by his study of French with his French masters about his fourteenth year. With Sarah Flower he argued out the problems of the Bible or the Church's faith; with Eliza Flower he read Shelley, who had superseded the Byronic, the Voltairean age. Shelley was his worship at the time of writing "*Pauline*," and Miss Flower his Egeria.

The friendship between the families of the Brownings at Camberwell, and the Flowers at Hackney, had had but the slender link of Miss Eliza Flower having been secured as music mistress for her young son by Mrs. Browning, but the intercourse was completely severed in 1829 by the sisters passing into the family of the Rev. Mr. Fox as his wards, on the death of their father.

When "*Pauline*" was written, Browning sent a copy of it to the Rev. Mr. Fox, recalling himself as the "oddish boy" whose poems Miss Flower had submitted to him years ago for his advice and opinion as to their suitability for publication. He was referred to by Miss Sarah Flower in a letter to a friend as the "boy poet we used to know" who had sent them a copy of his poem of "*Pauline*."

Eliza and Sarah Flower were the only children of Mr. Benjamin Flower, a staunch Nonconformist, who suffered a short term of imprisonment for reflecting on the political character of the Bishop of Llandaff. Eliza Flower was born in 1803, Sarah Flower in 1805. In 1820 the family removed from Harlow, in Essex, to Dalston, near Hackney, and became intimate with Mr. Fox and his family.

When Browning placed his impassioned poetical outpouring at the feet of "*Pauline*," he was ignorant of the development the years had brought to Miss Flower; what his grief was at finding her installed as the Egeria of Mr. Fox, taking the place of his dispossessed wife, immolated upon the cold altar of his household cares, there is

no recorded word, but, with passionate haste, every copy of “ Pauline ” was recalled from the publishers and stowed away in an attic. All record of it was to be swept into oblivion, as that of “ Incondita ” had been.

For the Byronic “ Weltz-Schmart ” Browning later expressed vigorous contempt. He early learned to keep a closed door, a shuttered window, between the world and his emotions.

The history of Mr. Fox covers the history of Eliza Flower, and explains the mystery of Browning’s broken friendship with her, and the loss of her musical genius to the world, which Browning had declared the “ world was waiting for.”

Mr. Fox continued his brilliant career as preacher of the day to Liberal circles. He became M.P. for Oldham, and stood for educational reform, being one of the most effective speakers in the House of Commons, and wielded literary power in the columns of the *Monthly Repository*.

The circumstances of the separation of Mr. and Mrs. Fox are related by Mr. Garnet, the biographer of Mr. Fox, and were well known to the congregation of South Place Chapel : the jealousy of Mrs. Fox when Miss Flower became an inmate of their home ; her formal complaint to the officials of the chapel ; her indignation, till, in 1833, she took the extreme step of separating from her husband, leaving Miss Flower at the head of the household with three of the children, she retiring to live at Bayswater with the remaining children. This separation lasted till the death of Miss Flower in 1846, when she returned to live with her husband.

Intellectual and spiritual, as the relations of Mr. Fox and Miss Flower were always conceded to be, the outcome of them to her was to quench, and put an end to, her musical career. The world would not buy her music ; her social circle contracted—all but a few staunch friends fell away, and, says Mr. Garnet : “ In electing to become the Egeria of Mr. Fox, in his separation from his wife, Eliza

Flower had all the trials of George Eliot and Mary Shelley without their compensations. In Macready's Journal we read of the price that Mr. Fox had also to pay :

" Dickens called," records the entry of April 10th, 1839, " and told me the Shakespeare Club had an objection to Mr. Fox as a member, and that he would be certainly black-balled except through the effect of my proposal of him; he wished the ballot to be deferred, to which I regretfully assented."

In 1831 Eliza Flower had published a series of musical illustrations of Sir Walter Scott's characters in his novels, which she dedicated to Sir Walter Scott. This received no recognition in her lifetime, but was engraved and issued in 1897 by Messrs. Novello, Ewer and Co., at the expense of her sympathisers of South Place Chapel, in honour of her memory. She had written largely for the musical services of South Place Chapel, whose musical side she conducted, and in 1842 she published a collection of anthems, with words by her sister Sarah—who had become the wife of Mr. Brydges Adams—by Mr. Fox, by Harriet Martineau, Coleridge, and a paraphrase from Carlyle's "*Though Wandering in a Strange Land*," and several other contributions.

Her musical genius and personal charm and filial devotion during her father's life are sketched by Miss Martineau in her novel "*Five Years of Youth*," which clothes the history of Benjamin Flower's struggle for religious liberty and the early life of his daughters left motherless.

In Miss Martineau's novel Eliza Flower is characterised as "*Sense*" and Sarah Flower as "*Sentiment*." Here Eliza Flower's musical qualities are described : her powers of composition, her singing, her glad uprising to music—everything suggested music to her, every piece of poetry which she understood and liked formed itself into melody in her mind without an effort. When a gleam of sunshine burst out she gave voice to it, and long before she heard cathedral music the chanting of the Psalms was familiar

to her by anticipation. She was a woman who, not being above small occasions, is equal to the greatest. Her steadfast soul looked abroad in agitations of life as calmly as her eye surveyed the rise or fall of the billowy expanse before her—if it be true that “ to the pure all things are pure, it is equally true that to the peaceful all things are peace.”

In Macready’s Journal we read :

“ Went from Chambers to dine with Rev. W. J. Fox at Bayswater. Met with him Mr. Horne, Miss Flower, who lives in the house with Mr. Fox, and a little girl, his daughter. Mr. Robert Browning came in after dinner. I was very much pleased to meet him and requested to be allowed to improve my acquaintance. He expressed himself as warmly gratified with the proposal.”—November 27th, 1835.

This little daughter of Mr. Fox became the Mrs. Bridell-Fox who contributed valuable particulars of Browning as a young man.

Browning remained a loyal friend to Mr. Fox and Miss Flower in their ambiguous relationship. When Eliza Flower lay dying, Browning wrote asking her to give him a personal farewell if possible :

“ I never had another feeling than entire admiration for your music—entire admiration. I put it apart from all other English music I know, and I fully believed in it as the music we all waited for. Of your health I shall not trust myself to speak; you must know what is unspoken. I should have been most happy to see you if but for a minute, and if next Wednesday I might take your hand for a moment . . . but you would concede that, if it were right, remembering what is now a very old friendship.

“ May God bless you for ever.”

Eliza Flower died of consumption in the year 1846, the year of Browning’s marriage with Miss Barrett.

Sarah Flower also became a member of Mr. Fox’s household with her sister as his ward in 1829, on the death of their father.

From 1832 to 1835 she was a contributor to the *Monthly*

Repository. In its columns she came upon an anonymous contributor, who attracted her attention and admiration. This was Mr. Brydges Adams, whose articles do not give the impression of a spirit equal in breadth and nobility to Sarah Flower's. He was an engineer, an inventor in a small way. The literary acquaintance developed to personal friendship, and, in 1834, Sarah Flower became the Sarah Flower Adams known to the world principally by her hymn "Nearer, my God, to Thee." That the marriage was not too successful may be inferred from Browning's remark to Mr. Gosse—"too sadly known as Sarah Flower Adams"—but what the grounds of his conclusions were we may only conjecture. Her feverish pursuit of dramatic fame is revealed in Macready's diary, in which there are numerous entries of appointments with Mr. Fox and Mrs. Adams, to test her dramatic possibilities. She wrote steadily and studied strenuously for the stage, appearing with considerable success in Shakespearean rôles till her health, never good, broke down completely, and her dreams of being an exponent of the drama vanished never to return, for the reason of delicacy of frame and an incurable deafness.

Her character is drawn by Miss Martineau in her novel "Five Years of Youth," comparing her with her sister in the sub-title of the book—"Or, Sense and Sentiment." The elder sister, the Eliza Flower of Browning's early admiration, is pictured as Sense, and given a strength of character and habit of self-sacrifice in marked contrast to the younger, who, as Miss Martineau sums up, was

"delicate in health, weak in spirits, the wish to do but impotent to perform, her time ill employed, a strong understanding which was no use to anybody, a clear knowledge of what was right, which did not prevent her doing wrong, a lively sympathy for other people's feelings which did not prevent her irritating or wounding them perpetually, a temper gentle and amiable on the whole, but liable to sudden and unaccountable disturbance. Her father had many an anxious hour on her account, though he still hoped that as she was so

young, she would conquer the irresolution which seemed the origin of all her faults. She met with much allowance on account of the delicacy of her health, but the delicacy was as much the effect as the cause of her faulty state of mind.”

Under the disaster of their father’s imprisonment, Miss Martineau’s picture is of the younger one failing to be of any use, hysterical, incapable of giving any support or assistance to the distressed man or elder sister, at the crisis of their misfortunes.

“I would fain believe my Bible as I used to,” wrote Sarah Flower to Mr. Fox—in seeking to give light to others her own light had failed. “It was in answering Robert Browning, that my mind refused to bring forward argument, turned recreant, and sided with the enemy.”

When “Pauline” was published, Sarah Flower wrote one of the three criticisms that appeared :

“Last Autumn L. dropped a poem of Shelley’s down there in the wood amongst the thick damp rotting leaves, and this Spring some one found a delicate exotic-looking plant growing wild on the very spot, with Pauline hanging from its slender stalk.”

The hymn “Nearer, my God, to Thee,” gave Sarah Flower Adams a niche in the Temple of Fame. The inspiration of the hymn is, in some quarters, credited to the emotions roused by Browning as the inducer of her grief arising out of their religious discussions. But the question arises, in acquaintance with Browning’s relations to the sisters, and subsequently to Mr. Fox and Miss Flower, whether, as veritable truth, the famous hymn may not have been one of those literary generosities of Browning not unknown to his friends now, but at that time unknown.

The spirit of the hymn is the spirit of Browning’s poetry, of Browning’s character as time has revealed it in his life. It stands for a God intoxication, for courage and passion of flight upwards, which is also essential stuff of

the poem “Johannes Agricola in Meditation.” “Darkness comes over me, my rest a stone,” say picture and hymn alike; “stony griefs” of the writer are akin to those of Sordello, who also declares that out of them song must be sung.

The character of Sarah Flower, as depicted by her friends, and by her other writings, does not display this God intoxication, this determination to get to God, this passion of soul to raise a Bethel out of its griefs, the determination to praise and trust though left to darkness and despair. Her long poem “Vivia Perpetua” betrays no genius, and among the thirteen poems appearing over her name, in the collection of hymns and anthems, in the hymnal of South Place Chapel, the hymn “Nearer, my God, to Thee” stands alone in spirit and construction, and is founded upon a rock of Biblical fact, which was no part of her method of art, and was one of the most constant foundations of Browning’s. His greatest inspirations arose out of pictures; his first poem displays his pride in his imaginative power, by a description of the picture of Andromeda always before him at that period of young manhood.

Poem after poem use pictures and Biblical stories as leverage for the wings of his fancy. His greatest inspirations arose from Biblical narrative, and the words breathed to the young Paracelsus, the mystic words of encouragement and promise, are the words of God to Jacob in his loneliness and exclusion and perplexities, it was the subject of a picture under which he sat fascinated in his boyhood.

In a letter to Miss Barrett he wrote of the fascination of this picture for him in the Dulwich Picture Gallery. To this Gallery he was admitted through his father’s influence, although under the prescribed age of fourteen. The picture of “Jacob’s Dream,” by Rembrandt, was a passion of Browning’s boyhood. He mentioned this early fascination more than once in his letters, wrote of “the

two Guidos, the wonderful Rembrandt, Jacob's vision, such a Watteau, the triumphant three Murillos, a Giorgione, all the Pouissons.” Almost surreptitiously on account of the age restriction, he revelled in this feast of art, as the young Sordello stole to the interdicted picture gallery of the Castle of Goito. Of the Dulwich Picture Gallery he wrote to Miss Barrett :

“The gallery I so love and am grateful to, having been used to going there when a child far under the age allowed by its regulations. I have sat before one, some one of those pictures I had predetermined to see a good hour, and then gone away.”

In later life he visited the Gallery in company with Mrs. Browning and Russell Lowell, and pointed out the “Jacob's Dream” of Rembrandt that he had spent hours before as a boy, and drew their attention to the apparent rapidity of the painting of it. That what so struck his imagination never apparently became enshrined in his poetry, in “rhyme the beautiful” for ever, is against his known methods, apparently a violation of the law of his poetic custom.

Browning's contempt for his early work went the length of destroying it as it came into his hands at Mr. Fox's death. It was Mrs. Bridell Fox, the daughter who remained in the home with Mr. Fox and Miss Flower, who presented the MS. of the hymn “Nearer, my God, to Thee” to the British Museum, though why such distinction to this one hymn of Sarah Flower Adams should have been paid is not recorded.

Browning's known dislike to the coinage of the heart's secrets was inveterate : for this reason Mrs. Browning refrained for three years from showing him the sonnets she had written around their love story ; for this reason the thin disguise of the title was assumed—disguise that Browning followed in all his poems, but old age wore the curtain so thin as to deceive no one. “With this same

key," he exclaims of the sonnet, "Shakespeare unlocked his heart." Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he.

"Outside should suffice for evidence,
And who so desires to penetrate
Deeper, must dive by the spirit sense."

But pushing enquiry beyond the divination of spirit sense, on acquaintance with the MS. of the hymn "Nearer, my God, to Thee," we find it without title or signature, with several corrections in it, apparently of later date, in another handwriting. It is dated 1840, the year in which Mr. Fox and Miss Flower were compiling their new hymnal for South Place Chapel. Why did Eliza Flower cherish this MS.? Why did she not sign her sister's name to it, as she obviously accounted it of such value? Why was it in her possession at all, passing to the possession of Mrs. Bridell Fox on her father's death in 1864? Evidently something of peculiar value for the nation, as it was passed on by Mrs. Bridell Fox to the National Museum.

The corrections in this manuscript, as if by an after-thought and maturer poetic faculty, carry subtle suggestions of higher accomplishment in their emendations; they raise the emotion from the personal and human to the impersonal and Divine.

The line originally "Bright with their praise," becomes in the correction "Bright with Thy praise."

In another line the concrete and material is lifted to the abstract and spiritual: "My pillow a stone" becomes "My *rest* a stone"—word more true, as spoken to Jacob by the God of Israel.

In another the limited and bounded become the illimitable and intangible, aspiration in escape to the beyond, when "Yet in night's dream I'd be" becomes "Yet in my dreams I'd be, Nearer, my God, to Thee—Nearer to Thee." In another line the level of the call of emotion

rises from earth to Heaven in : “ Angels that beckon me ” becoming “ Angels to beckon me.”

In 1840 Mr. Fox and Miss Flower were selecting new material to add to the old hymnal of South Place Chapel. All the poets were being drawn upon, and Browning’s only acknowledged assistance to them is the few lines from “ Paracelsus ” :

“ If I stoop
Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time : I press God’s lamp
Close to my breast ; its splendour soon or late
Will pierce the gloom. I shall emerge some day.”

Browning’s gratitude to Mr. Fox for his early review of “ Pauline ” was scarcely likely to remain unfruitful in the face of his and Miss Flower’s needs in the compilation of their new hymnal. Unless “ Nearer, my God, to Thee ” was his, his contribution to their efforts was merely this short extract from “ Paracelsus,” and this seems against Browning’s known spirit of generosity and gratitude to those who had even the smallest claim to his assistance from past generosity to himself. The transcript of “ Incondita ” by Miss Flower was returned to Browning at Mr. Fox’s death in 1864. All other scraps of verse he had given to Miss Flower were destroyed by him as they fell into his hands after her death.

The manuscript of “ Nearer, my God, to Thee ” is displayed in a monograph by John Julian, D.D., among the collection of the British Museum Library.

Browning’s literary generosities are not unknown now ; the account of his writing the article on the life of Strafford for the “ Cabinet Cyclopædia ” to help his friend John Forster, who was ill, is given in the “ Browning Cyclopædia ” of Dr. Berdoe ; and in a letter to Miss Barrett we find Browning recalling certain of his prose literary adventures in the humorous vein of a last resort from his unremunerative poetry, in the discussion of his providing ways and means for their support. Putting

aside her assertion of his “genius,” he replies “that he has a certain talent for literature which the world recognises.”

“I have tried it in various ways,” he writes, “just to be sure that I was a little magnanimous in never intending to use it. Thus in more than one of the reviews that laughed my ‘Paracelsus’ to scorn ten years ago—in the same column of these reviews would follow a most laudatory notice of an Elementary French book on a new plan which I ‘did’ for my old French Master and he published—that was really a useful work—according to the reviewer.”

During the two years following the publication of “Pauline” three poems were sent by Browning to the *Monthly Repository*, and appeared over the signature “Z.”

These poems were “Johannes Agricola in Meditation,” “Porphyrias’ Lover,” and a Sonnet : the two former were included in the third number of the “Bells and Pomegranates” Series, coupled under the title of “Madhouse Cells”; the Sonnet was never issued among Browning’s collected work.

This period 1833-34 was a silent one, or if composing went on the result was kept in his desk.

“Johannes Agricola” was Luther’s fellow-worker in the Reformation—he helped Luther establish the reformed religion at Frankfort; he recanted the Antinomian doctrine which Browning’s poem depicts, after which he was reinstated as Court preacher.

The poem is the triumphant utterance of a soul elected to God, chosen irrevocably for its high destiny, upon whom no punishment could fall, no future lapse from it could affect his right to the reward of Heaven.

It is an utterance of the rapture of one confident of God, determined to get to God, sure of God’s pre-knowledge of him, his growth inevitably upwards :

“ Like a tree
That buds and blooms nor seeks to know
The law by which it prospers so.”

The awesome thought that perhaps he alone of men is so chosen does not daunt him ; he sings a song of exultation that he at least is conscious of God :

“ No suns and moons though e'er so bright
 Avail to stop me ; splendour proof
 I keep the broods of stars aloof,
 For I intend to get to God,
 For 'tis to God I speed so fast,
 For in God's breast, my own abode,
 Those shoals of dazzling glory, passed
 I lay my spirit down at last.”

* * * * *

“ Priest, doctor, hermit, monk grown white
 With prayer, the wan acolyte,
 The incense swinging child—undone
 Before God fashioned star or sun :
 God whom I praise, how could I praise
 If such as I might understand,
 Make out and reckon on his ways
 And bargain for his love and stand
 Paying a price, at his right hand.”

“ Porphyrias' Lover ” presents a man sitting in loneliness and deep dejection. The woman he loves enters—murmurs that she loves him. Rather than lose her, he decides to kill her while she is still his :

“ Mine, mine fair,
 Perfectly pure and good.”

And then he found a thing to do, and all her hair

“ In one long yellow string I wound
 Three times her little throat around and strangled her.”

He sits the night through in rapture with her so :

“ And thus we sit together now
 And all night long we have not stirred,
 And yet God has not said a word.

“ Z.”

The Sonnet appeared in the *Monthly Repository* of August 17th, 1834. It records a sorrow, fast-gathering tears, estrangement from one whom others praise, but his

homage must find no expression. He asks if she recalls him and wonders at his want of worship amid all her votaries :

“ Eyes calm beside thee (Lady, could’st thou know)
May turn away thick with fast gathering tears.
I glance not where all gaze: thrilling and low
Their passionate praises reach thee—my cheek wears
Alone no wonder when thou passest by,
Thy tremulous lids bent and suffused reply
To the irrepressible homage which doth glow
On every lip but mine: if in thine ears
Their accents linger, and thou dost recall
Me as I stood, still guarded, very pale
Beside each votarist, whose lighted brow
Wore worship like an aureole, o’er them all
My beauty, thou wilt murmur, did prevail
Save that one only: Lady, could’st thou know.”

CHAPTER III

"PARACELSIUS"

Visit of Browning to Russia—Hopes of diplomatic appointment—Poetry resumed—“Paracelsus” written in six months on return from Russia—Poetic autobiography and medieval mysticism—Lyrical confession of call to poetry.

AFTER the publication and hurried recall of “Pauline” from the publishers, the future of Browning was under serious family consideration. He had hopes of a diplomatic calling and went to Russia with the Consul-General, Chevalier George de Benkhausen; he saw Russia, and was admitted to diplomatic circles with the foreign Embassy. The visit lasted three months; they went and returned through the Low Countries, travelling 1,500 miles night and day. Of this rapid journey such poems as “Ivan Ivanovitch” and “How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix” bear memories.

At this time negotiations were also entered into to obtain for him a position in an Embassy to Persia, but nothing came of them, and his hopes of entering the Diplomatic Service came to nothing.

In a note prefixed to the first edition of the poem of “Paracelsus” Browning wrote :

“The author has shown a mind at work, has displayed a mood in its rise and progress, suffering the agency to be discerned in its effects alone. . . . Were the scenes stars, the reader’s co-operating fancy must connect chasms and scattered lights into one constellation—a lyre or a crown.”

The Preface of “Paracelsus” is dated March 15th, 1835, and is dedicated to a young Frenchman, Comte Amédée de Ripert-Monclar, and the information was given in it that the poem had not been imagined even six months

before it was completed. The MS. is in the Forster Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Comte de Ripert-Monclar was introduced to the Browning family by Mr. William Shergold Browning, half-brother of the elder Robert Browning, who was settled in Paris, where his father's interest had placed him in a Rothschild house. He was a young Frenchman, understood to be on a mission in connection with the Royalist cause, and doubtless with a mind informed of the past struggle of Mesmer with the medical societies.

It is said that the life of Paracelsus was considered by the family not to offer scope for a poem, as the medieval scientist had found no room for the passion of love, in his devotions to research : the emotion of tender affection introduced into the poem, the dear Festus and saintly Michal, we must believe are silhouettes of the father and mother of the poet, whose love and care, and practical support, never failed their son.

The romance of his soul, Browning ever declared, lay in " poor old Camberwell " amid its sunsets and great stars, its crescent moons, its great double moon rainbow, its midnights and grey mornings, its golden sunrises—all are transfigured by art into his poems : the commons around Camberwell are glorified in the poems of his midnight visions. " It was on one of these commons," says Mr. Sharp, " that Carlyle, riding for exercise, was stopped by Browning, a beautiful youth who introduced himself as one of the philosopher's great admirers." Riding was Browning's delight at this time. He rode his uncle Reuben's horse " York," which was stabled at their house. He had the use of " York " when his uncle was at his work in the City.

" As a boy Browning would lie for hours among the elms at Camberwell, dreaming and looking upon distant London—a golden city of the west, when the sunlight came streaming in long shafts from behind the towers of Westminster and flashed upon the gold cross of St. Paul's . . . there he beheld

London by night . . . there he came upon the poems of Shelley and Keats. More than once Browning referred to this experience as his first pervasive joy, his first happiness in outlook, then he felt the artistic impulse stirring within him, like the rising of the sap in a tree.”—“*Life of Browning*,” by William Sharp.

He told a friend, reports Mr. Sharp, that it was a May night, and that in a laburnum “heavy with its weight of gold, and in a great copper-beech at the end of a neighbour’s garden, two nightingales strove one against the other.”

“He would lie so quietly,” says Mr. Sharp, “amid the thickets and flowering hedges, that the life of the natural world played over him unheeded.”

He was keenly susceptible to his mother’s music, says this biographer, and relates an incident of the strong emotions of the child under the influence of his mother’s music. “He heard his mother’s music,” says Mr. Sharp, “and wished to be a musician: recollects his father’s drawings and wished to be an artist.”

In the poem of “Paracelsus” the familiar current of Thames transfers to the gliding Mayne, whose flowing soothed the brain of the distracted Paracelsus; and if the “perfect pair” of Browning’s poem are not tributes to the never-failing friend, his father, and the ever devoted watchful love of his mother—the pair who saw with anxiety their “swan’s nest” floating, apparently, out to sea in those early years—he never enshrined his gratitude to them, which is unthinkable in one who ever paid this debt so royally to his appreciators.

In the poem of “Paracelsus,” London with its glow by night, the romantic atmosphere of “poor old Camberwell,” transmute to distant Wurtsberg in the alembic of imagination, directed by that law, says Carlyle, which compels man to hide the deepest experiences of his soul under “clothes”; and as he draped his own deepest experience in the clothes of the philosophic Teufelsdrockh, Browning

draped his under the academic garment of Paracelsus, the medieval scientist and mystic, and "Sordello," the medieval poet and patriot. As the poem of "Pauline" embalmed the past of Browning at twenty years of age, the poem of "Paracelsus" enshrined all the poetic and intellectual gains of twenty-two, and declared the aims and ambitions, the ardour and spiritual glow, of a new hypothesis, a new ambition, and discloses a leap from the doubts and despairs of "Pauline" to the "truths" and hopes of "Paracelsus."

The vivid uprise of poetic exhilaration, that release of imagination to new splendour, on reading the poetry of Shelley and Keats, is here embalmed in the lyrical call to poetry; that experience, says Mr. Sharp, which he more than once heard Browning refer to as his first pervasive joy, his first happiness in outlook. In the poem of "Paracelsus" the good father transmutes to grave Festus, the tender mother to intuitive Michal, we must believe.

The name of Festus recalls the scene in the life of Paul of Tarsus before the Governor of Judea, where he makes the defence of himself and states his experiences, which defence was to pass on, out into the great world, in appeal to Cæsar. The name of Michal recalls the scene in the life of David, when his watching wife looked on, puzzled and critical at her husband's strange methods of conducting the Ark of the Lord to Zion. The moulding influences of Browning's boyhood were his father's erudition and artistic proclivities, and his mother's musician soul, and deeply religious and extremely spiritual temperament, and the deep and persistent underlying will to do the duties that lay to her hand. He inherited his mother's magnetic personality, which could draw all the dumb existence of the garden about her. To Browning his mother was ever a "divine woman," described by Carlyle as "true type of a Scottish gentlewoman."

Of the nervous connection between Browning and his

mother, he wrote to Miss Barrett that it was a real physical thing that they joyed and suffered together. He also shared her earnestly religious practice : as a boy, he was “passionately religious,” he confessed. His mother was the confidante and encourager of his youthful output of poetry—she was the instrument of his obtaining the poetry of Shelley and Keats, whose volumes she gave him on his sixteenth birthday.

From his father Browning inherited the altruistic passion for humanity, the human sense, and spirit of intuition of other human beings and their needs; the father who had revolted at the cruel treatment of other human beings, and returned from the West Indies to the disgust of his father, who refused any further help to him than the procuring for him of a clerkship in the Bank of England.

In letters to Miss Barrett of 1846 the family history of the poet is related by Browning :

“ My father is tender-hearted to a fault . . . to all women and children he is chivalrous. . . . If we are poor it is to my father’s infinite glory, who, as my mother told me last night as we sate alone, conceived such a hatred of the slave system in the West Indies (where his mother was born, who died in his infancy), that he relinquished every prospect—supported himself while there, in some other capacity, and came back, while yet a boy, to his father’s profound astonishment and rage—one proof of which was, that when he heard that his son was a suitor to her, my mother, he benevolently waited on her uncle to assure him that his niece would be thrown away on a man so evidently born to be hanged. My father on his return had the intention of devoting himself to art, for which he had many qualifications and abundant love ; but the quarrel with his father—who married again and continued to hate him, till a few years before his death—induced him to go at once and consume his life after a fashion he always detested.”

The grandfather of the poet married a second time. There was a family of the second marriage, and Browning’s father was described by one of these half-brothers, Mr. Reuben Browning, as “of extraordinary talents,

profound intelligence, pre-eminent good nature, producing facetious epigrams and fugitive poems. Of all his acquaintances, few were cognizant of his intrinsic worth," says this Mr. Reuben Browning, the Uncle Reuben whose horse "York" carried Robert Browning on those rides so necessary to his well-being, the horse and gallops remembered and immortalised in the poem, "How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix."

"The elder Browning," says this authority, "was of most unassuming, reticent, retiring nature. He had a wonderful store of information, an inexhaustible mine, knew the critical points of ancient and modern history, the lore of the middle ages, all political combinations of parties, and especially the lives of the poets and painters—in short, he was a living Encyclopædia. He searched and knew all the Bookstalls in London; his own library was a treasure, his books not remarkable for costly binding, but rare, and annotated profusely; his memory was acute, recalling every book in his library. He was well knit, rather undersized, blue-eyed, brown-haired, a book lover, scholar, retired banker, devoted to home. From him Robert Browning the poet received practically his whole early education."

"His school life counted for little," also says his sister, "but among his father's books he read voraciously."

In the letters to Miss Barrett we see the father described in Browning's poems, the father "who was a scholar and knew Greek"; also the father who was "worlds away" from the son in poetic and artistic ideals, who lingered with Pope in the eighteenth century, while the son was pushing on tumultuously into the spiritual Romanticism of the twentieth, preceding his time in his presentment of the only thing he thought worth study—the romance of soul.

Robert Browning's account of his father, given by Mr. Gosse in his "Personalia," is that

"for his poetic gods his father had no fondness. From the first their minds diverged upon every intellectual point until the close of the old gentleman's life, when he learned, as the whole world was learning, to appreciate the fine flavour of his

son's poetry. He was always, however, loving and sympathetic, divining the genuine poetic impulse, though blind to the beauty of the forms it took, and in this case the rare phenomenon seems to have appeared, of a boy consciously, and of set purpose, trained to be a poet.

“ Robert Browning the father had handled the same subjects as his son. He had written verse upon the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin; this he destroyed when he knew his son had done so also. He cast the story of the medieval poet Sordello into a poem, the summary of which is extant; he knew the story of the medieval scientist Paracelsus. The pension received by the father on his retirement from the Bank of England, together with a small income derived from his mother's West Indian properties, enabled the family to live in a comfortable independence, out of which the father paid for the publication of his son's early work.”

In the poem of “ Paracelsus ” the characteristics of father and mother are reproduced in translucent art and imaginative truth. His parents believed when they could not understand :

“ They believe in me,” he wrote to Miss Barrett with reference to their marriage; “ if I brought them a beggar or a famous actress, even, they would believe in her because of me. . . . My father studies my works, illustrating them, and writes his notion of what a criticism should be, none that have appeared satisfying him.”

To his mother's music, Mr. Sharp writes in his biography, he was acutely susceptible :

“ It was Mrs. Browning's chief happiness this, her hour of darkness and solitude and music while, in the next room, the little son would be sitting on his father's knee, listening with enthusiastic attention, to the Tale of Troy, with marvellous illustrations among the glowing coals in the fireplace, with below all the vaguely heard accompaniment of the mother's music.”

It is probably true as recorded by biographers of Browning that the life of Paracelsus, the medieval scientist and mystic, as subject for his Art, was suggested by the young Frenchman to whom the poem is dedicated : in 1835 the warfare between the Medical Faculty and the

exponents of Mesmerism, which derived from the doctrines of Paracelsus, was at its height.

It was in 1776 that Mesmer took for subject for his inaugural dissertation for his doctor's degree in Vienna, "The Influence of the Planets on the Human Body," an idea derived from the ideas of Paracelsus as to the possibilities of influences of magnetic character from the planetary world to the human world.

Mesmer drew his theories into practical operation in Paris, using the mechanical means of passes to influence his patient.

The Faculty of Medicine in France had combated Mesmer's claims to healing by a method entirely outside orthodox medical practice, and the warfare between the Medical Faculty and Dr. John Elliotson in London was at its hottest at the time Browning projected and carried through in six months his poem of "Paracelsus." As a result of collision with the authorities, Dr. Elliotson was called upon to resign by resolution of the Council of University College, unless he abjured the practice of the new method of "animal magnetism" in his treatment of disease, and the Council resolved "that the Hospital Committee be instructed to take such steps as they shall deem most advisable to prevent the practice of mesmerism or animal magnetism in future within its hospital." In consequence Elliotson resigned his position as physician to the hospital. Dr. Elliotson was an intimate friend of the circle of the Rev. Mr. Fox, and his struggle was doubtless followed with interest by his friends.

"The aim of Paracelsus," says the "Encyclopædia Britannica," "was to put before the physicians of his time a grand ideal of their profession. . . . His doctrines led him to trace the dependence of the human body upon outer nature for its sustenance and cure. . . . He supposed the connection of man with the great world of nature. . . . He had by some kind of intuition arrived at the conclusion that the operations in the body were of a chemical character. . . . His positive services are to be summed up in this wide

application of chemical ideas about method and general theory. The cause of his death, like most details in his history, is uncertain. His enemies asserted that he died in a low tavern in consequence of a drunken debauch. Others maintain that he was thrown down a steep place by some emissaries either of the physicians or the apothecaries both of whom he had during his life grievously harassed. He was buried in the churchyard of St. Sebastian, but in 1872 his bones were removed to the porch of the church, and a monument of reddish-white marble was erected to his memory.”

At the conclusion of the poem of “ Paracelsus ” an extract of the popular account of the life of Paracelsus from the “ Biographie Universelle de Paris,” 1822, is given by Browning. From some of these conclusions Browning differed, and, in notes affixed to this extract, he points out where he differs from the opinion of the “ Biographie Universelle,” and asserts two points upon which there can be no doubt. The title of Paracelsus to be the father of modern chemistry is indisputable ; he pins his faith to that. Also that he was discerner of the important function of the circulation of the blood and the sanguinification of the heart ; that his mysterious cure called “ Azoth ” was “ laudanum itself ” ; that he was an astrological enthusiast, a man of prodigious genius : “ And there is also no doubt of the Protestantism of Paracelsus ; his books were excommunicated by the Church. . . . I suppose many hints lie scattered in his neglected books which clever appropriators have since developed with applause.”

Paracelsus also affirmed his belief that human beings influenced each other by physical touch to lull frenzy and insanity ; thus he claimed to be greater than Celsus : for by subtle understanding of the Scriptures, he affirmed, man may act with God and prophesy from Him ; the Scripture is full of divine mysteries as magic is full of natural secrets.

The famous “ Elixir ” of the medieval scientist and mystic, Paracelsus, asserted to be the “ Spirit of Truth ” ; he declared that it was

"the purest and subtlest element in an indestructible body which cannot be destroyed and is produced by Art—the spirit of God too deep for our understanding, the last, greatest, and highest secret of nature . . . it is a potent leaven of medicine set within the hand and will of the physician."—"Concerning the Mystery of the Elements."

This secret of "Truth" as wonder-worker was that which "the world cannot comprehend without the instruction of the Holy Ghost" ("Concerning the Mystery of the Elements").

"These writings of mine," said the medieval Paracelsus, "may be regarded as false by the reader, yet to the initiated they are true and possible. Imagination is the Spirit of Truth, is the wonder-worker which the world cannot comprehend without the interpretation of the Holy Ghost, or without the instruction of those who know it . . . as the Soul moves the limbs of the body so does this Spirit move all bodies—it is sought by many and found by few. Truth is a right commingling of Natural forces, a skilled perfect equation of all the elements, a most particular union of spiritual virtues, an indissoluble uniting of body and soul . . . it is the last and highest thing to be sought under Heaven, the secret of secrets, a wondrous closing and finishing of philosophical work."

"The Spirit of Truth is the Elixir of Life which as part of its work can expand the bloodvessels, cure withered limbs, restore strength to the sight, and in growing persons removes what is superfluous, and makes good the defects of the limbs: it makes the old young and revives those who are on the point of death; it goes to the heart and restores the natural heat of the liver."

"This spirit of imagination," wrote Paracelsus, "cures colds and fevers: in its glorified form its natural works are taken for miracles, wherein it possesses all previous powers and virtues in a more wondrous degree."

"This Spirit flies through the midst of the Heavens like a morning mist, leads its burning fire into the water, and has its shining reality through the Heavens: it is the purest and noblest element in an indestructible body, which cannot be destroyed nor harmed by the elements, and is produced by Art: it is the Spirit of God too deep for our understanding, the last greatest and highest secret of nature."

"The Almighty be praised for having created this Art, and for revealing it to God-fearing men . . . therefore I beg all Christians possessing this knowledge to communicate the

same to nobody except it be one living in Godliness, of well proved virtue and praising God who has given such a treasure to man—for many seek but few find it . . . the impure and those living in vice are unworthy of it. I testify before God that I lie not, although it be impossible to fools that no one has hitherto explained Nature so deeply—to Jesus Christ be praise and glory immortal. Amen.”

Paracelsus was a reformer endeavouring to liberate medicine from its slavery to the past; he was the first to enquire into and make a study of the epidemic of St. Vitus' dance, which prevailed as a plague over thousands in 1418. Physicians did not attempt to cure the malady, which was left to the priests, as it was considered to be due to demoniacal possession.

Paracelsus contested the theory of possession, and would not admit the power of the Saints to inflict diseases—he defied the spirit of priestly authority of the time; he cast down the Canon Law, as he cast down and burnt the orthodox books of medicine, which had been handed down by his predecessors; he declared they were blind guides, he forsook them to follow Truth. He gave his services to the poor gratuitously, was hated by medical and priestly authorities alike, and is said to have written his books with a secret meaning under the obvious instruction to avoid the persecutors. In place of the filthy messes and elaborate concoctions of the times, he taught the use of tinctures and quintessences; he invented laudanum, and anticipated the discovery of the efficacy of the transfusion of blood. He opposed the barbarous methods of reducing dislocation and dealing with fractures, introduced the use of mercury, iron, sulphur, antimony, arsenic, gold, tin, lead, and the vegetable remedy of arnica, and divined the truth of the circulation of the blood.

In the region of the occult he taught the power of imagination to possess the supreme secret of healing.

Imagination has an expulsive virtue, taught Paracelsus, the medieval mystic; it is the moon of the microcosm of the brain—all our sufferings, all our vice, are fed by

imagination. It can penetrate and ascend to the superior heaven, and passes from star to star ; this same heaven it can overcome and moderate. Heaven, on the other hand, has the power of refunding that impression, so a strong imagination is the source of both good and evil.

The hidden powers of the ether are asserted by Paracelsus to be controlled by the imagination. His cure for mental disease was this imagination :

“ As imagination can create mental pictures, imagination can dispel them ; piety is the principal and most consummate of means of preservation against bad imaginations. Whoever, therefore, has intellect from God, to him this medicine shall be given. The ignorant Galenist, Beanus, will not be able to comprehend it, nay he will turn from it in disgust—for this work takes effect and acts in the light of nature. . . . Theophrastus will stand by the truth—the lame works of the ointment-people and the unctious of the physicians and doctors with all their pomp and authority, shall go to utter destruction. . . . ”

“ Christ offered eternal wisdom to the world ; when this was offered it was right that inferior wisdom should be repudiated, and the higher acknowledged.

“ The wisdom of Christ is better than the wisdom of Nature—a cure wrought by God is better than one by herbs—the sick are healed and the dead raised by Apostles ; nor is there any deceit about those things . . . we are created by the Father for the light of Nature—we are called by the Son for eternity.

“ The light is transferred to us from the Father as if by inheritance, and the light from God the Son here in this world to eternity. Neither hinders the other—the Son the Father, the Father the Son.”

“ If you know nothing, and can do nothing,” he writes to his medical and priestly persecutors, “ why do you despise me as though I were a wandering Helvetian Cow and inveigh against me a wandering vagabond ?”—*Digest from the Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus, translated by Arthur Edward Waite.*

How much the poem of “ Paracelsus ” synchronises with the philosophy of Paracelsus, the medieval scientist and mystic, we have no means of knowing, except what may be divined in the poem itself. Browning was a first-hand

mystic, and in this poem perhaps he repeats the set purpose confessed in “*Pauline*,” with reference to Shelley, of doing honour to one whose high worth was unknown, in whose utterances he found, as he had done in the poems of Shelley, coincident thought and corroborative flashings of his own divinations and speculations.

It is reported that someone once said in Carlyle’s hearing that Browning derived his mysticism from Coleridge, which was instantly repudiated: “Browning was an original man, and had no need to go marauding in that, or in any other quarter,” he replied indignantly.

CHAPTER IV

“PARACELSIUS” (Continued)

THE poem of “Paracelsus” is in five books : it presents five crises of great emotion :

Paracelsus Aspires.
Paracelsus Attains.
Paracelsus.
Paracelsus Aspires.
Paracelsus Attains.

In the poem of “Paracelsus” the material of “Pauline” was drawn upon in phrases and whole lines in its metaphor and simile and mood.

Browning believed that the poem of “Pauline” was swept into oblivion with his previous collection “Incondita,” so he used the old material, at times, line for line. “Paracelsus” he intended to be his first poem ; it was written, so the Preface ran, to display a mood—not dissect the mood itself. In the first book Paracelsus exhibits the mood in its effects. Festus described the mood as he saw it react upon Paracelsus. Michal listens and supports intuitively the mood of Paracelsus.

The poem opens with Paracelsus, Festus, and Michal in consultation—the scene is a garden. Paracelsus draws his friends close to him to hear his confession : first he asks their forgiveness, knows that his memory will never want a home in theirs nor “forgiving love as shall embalm it there.”

He asks them to forgive, to remember him aright as he was born to be. “You must forget all fitful strange

and moody waywardness which e'er confused my better spirit, to dwell only on moments such as these, dear friends.”

Paracelsus addresses Michal tenderly, she is inclined to be sad ; he rallies her :

“ Ah, at length the old smile meet for her, the lady of
This sequestered nook ! this kingdom, limited
Alone by one old populous green wall.”

Remember the joys of the living things of our garden,
reminds Paracelsus :

“ *Michal.* In truth we have lived carelessly and well.
Paracelsus. And shall my perfect pair ! each trust
me born
For the other ; nay, your very hair, when mixed
Is of one hue.

Ah see, the sun sinks broad
Behind Saint Saviour’s : wholly gone at last !
Though heaven and earth and all things were at stake
Sweet Michal must not weep, our parting eve.

Paracelsus. Dear Festus, hear me, what is it you
wish ?
That I should lay aside my heart’s pursuit,
Abandon the sole end for which I live,
Reject God’s great commission, and so die !
Yet how has grown that love ? Even in a long
And patient cherishing of the self-same spirit
It now would quell : as though a mother hoped
To stay the lusty manhood of the child
Once weak upon her knees. I was not born
Informed and fearless from the first, but shrank
From aught which marked me out apart from men.
I would have lived their life, and died their death,
Lost in their ranks, eluding destiny :
But you first guided me through doubt and fear,
Taught me to know mankind and know myself ;
And now that I am strong, and full of hope,
That, from my soul, I can reject all aims
Save those your earnest words made plain to me
Now that I touch the brink of my design,
When I would have a triumph in their eyes
A glad cheer in their voices—Michal weeps
And Festus ponders gravely !”

Paracelsus pleads for his faith, begs for sympathy with his ideas, asks his friends to suspend their judgment, to have faith in this desire of his to push onward.

But Festus would be sure he is not presuming boastfully that God's labour is laid on him, and Michal would know why he must go alone :

“ Ask at once Festus, wherefore he should scorn,” she pleads.

“ *Festus.* Stay, Michal: Aureole, I speak guardedly And gravely, knowing well whate'er your error This is no ill-considered choice of yours, No sudden fancy of an ardent boy.

. . . . this new ardour which supplants the old
I watched too; 'twas significant and strange,
To see the sudden pause, the total change;
From contest, the transition to repose
From pressing onward as his fellows pressed
To a blank idleness, yet most unlike
The dull stagnation of a soul, content
Once foiled to leave betimes a thriveless quest,
That ostentatious show of past defeat,
That ready acquiescence in contempt.

. . . . After-signs disclosed, what you confirmed
That you prepared to task to the uttermost
Your strength, in furtherance of a certain aim
Which—while it bore the name your rivals gave
Their own most puny efforts—was so vast
In scope that it included their best flights,
Combined them, and desired to gain one prize
In place of many—the secret of the world
Of man, and man's true purpose, path and fate.

Paracelsus. I profess no other share
In the selection of my lot than this
My ready answer to the will of God
Who summons me to be his organ. All
Whose innate strength supports them shall succeed
No better than the sages.”

Festus pleads for more humility, he has seen the new mood of Paracelsus presented in the effects he had noted; he would know further what warrant Paracelsus has for this faith in himself, whether he can search his heart and find anything to justify it: “ rather a wild desire for this distinction than security of its existence.”

“ *Paracelsus* (after a pause). No, I have naught to fear;
 who will may know
 The secretest working of my soul.”

Paracelsus confesses the fierce energy of his soul, instinct striving because it is its nature to strive—the irresistible force working within him—the impulses he cannot disregard : he feels

“ sure that God
 Ne'er dooms to waste the strength he deigns impart.
 Ask the gier-eagle why she stoops at once
 Into the vast and unexplored abyss,
 What full grown power informs her from the first,
 Why she not marvels, strenuously beating
 The silent boundless regions of the sky!
 Be sure they sleep not whom God needs !”

Paracelsus relates his faith that he is singled out for God's purpose—“ I singled out for this.” He confesses the fire within that urges him on :

“ As from without some master, so it seemed
 Repressed and urged its current—rather
 I will believe an angel ruled me thus
 Than that my soul's own workings, own high nature
 So became manifest. I knew not then
 What whispered in the evening, and spoke out
 At midnight.

“ Youth is confused ; yet never
 So dull was I but, when that spirit passed
 I turned to him, scarce consciously, as turns
 A water-snake when fairies cross his sleep.
 You were beside me, Festus, as you say,
 You saw me plunge in their pursuits whom fame
 Is lavish to attest the lords of mind.”

Festus has seen all this, relates the growth he has watched over from childhood. He knows this is no ill-considered choice, no sudden fancy of an ardent boy—it seemed earnest and resolved a determination to win renown by patient toil. He had noted the sudden pause, the new ardour, the sudden change from contest to blank idleness—it was significant and strange—but the mood baffled him for explanation.

Paracelsus pursues his confession, asks if Festus had gathered nothing from his scorn of his old pursuits, his old aim to rival those whom fame attests the lords of mind—from which, he asserts, came a slow and strangling failure.

“ I would slur over
 That struggle ; suffice it that I loathed myself
 As weak compared with them, yet felt somehow
 A mighty power was brooding, taking shape
 . . . and this lasted till one night
 When as I sat revolving it and more
 A still voice from without said : ‘ Seest thou not,
 Desponding child, whence spring defeat and loss
 Even from thyself ? Consider : hast thou gazed
 Presumptuously on wisdom’s countenance,
 No veil between ? ’

“ And softer came the voice : ‘ There is a way :
 ’Tis hard for flesh to tread therein, imbued
 With frailty—hopeless, if indulgence first
 Have ripened inborn germs of sin to strength.
 Wilt thou adventure for my sake and man’s
 Apart from all reward ? ’ And last it breathed :
 ‘ Be happy, my good soldier ; I am by thee,
 Be sure, even to the end ? ’ I answered not
 Knowing him. As he spoke, I was endued
 With comprehension, and a steadfast will ;
 And when he ceased my brow was sealed his own.

“ If there took place no special change in me
 How comes it all things wore a different view
 Thenceforward? pregnant with vast consequence,
 Teeming with grand result, loaded with fate,
 So that when, quailing at the mighty range
 Of secret truths which yearn for birth, I haste
 To contemplate undazzled some one truth,
 Its bearings and effect alone—at once
 What was a speck expands into a star
 Asking a life to pass exploring this
 Till I near craze. I go to prove my soul !
 I see my way as birds their trackless way.
 I shall arrive ! what time, what circuit first,
 I ask not : but unless God sends his hail
 Or blinding fireballs, sleet or stifling snow,
 In some time, his good time, I shall arrive.
 He guides me and the bird. In his good time ! ”

The utterance of Paracelsus is as of one raving to Festus—he reminds him that :

“ As strong delusions have prevailed ere now ”;

and he reminds him that so have others :

“ Set out as gallantly to seek their ruin.”

“ Must I tear up my very vitals ?” queries Paracelsus passionately of Festus :

“ You, who are you forsooth ? Will you divine nothing ?”

“ Then Aureole is God’s Commissary,” says the more understanding Michal :

“ He shall be great and grand—and all for us ?”

“ No, sweet,

Not great and grand. If I can serve mankind

’Tis well ; but there our intercourse must end :

I never shall be served by those I serve.”

Michal hears the remonstrance of Festus, his half-scorn of the gift Paracelsus claims ; it is a plague spot, he asserts, disguise it as you may, and Michal thinks of their coming separation :

“ O, Aureole, can I sing when all alone
Without first calling, in my fancy, both
To listen by my side ?”

“ Do not cut yourself off from human weal,” pleads Festus :

“ A man that dares affect
To spend his life in service to his kind
For no reward of theirs.
There are strange punishments for such.”

“ Stay with us,” pleads Michal, “ an angel warns me
Man should be humble ; you are very proud,
And God, dethroned, has doleful plagues for such !”

“ Dearest Michal, dearest Festus,” answers Paracelsus,

“ What shall I say, if not that I desire
To justify your love ; and will, dear friends
In swerving nothing from my first resolves.”

Paracelsus unfolds his faith in the power that justifies his resolve, the truth he knows :

“ Truth is within ourselves ; it takes no rise
 From outward things, whate’er you may believe
 There is an inmost centre in us all.
 Where truth abides in fulness ; and around
 Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
 This perfect clear perception—which is truth.
 A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
 Binds it, and makes the error ; and to know
 Rather consists in opening out a way
 Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape
 Than in effecting entry for a light
 Supposed to be without.”

How does truth dawn ? he asks. Not from books, for—

“ Men have grown old among their books
 To die case-hardened in their ignorance.”

Truth arises in us mysteriously as cloud of cape from air, perhaps to some loiterer in the autumn on an idle day :

“ Hence may not truth be lodged in all alike,
 The lowest and the highest ? some slight film
 The interposing bar which binds a soul
 And makes the idiot, just as makes the sage
 Some film removed.

“ Therefore set free the soul alike in all,
 Discovering the true laws by which the flesh
 Accloys the spirit—make no more giants, God
 But elevate the race at once.

“ I go to gather this,” says Paracelsus—
 “ The secret knowledge here and there dispersed
 About the world.
 I cannot feed on beauty for the sake of beauty alone,
 Nor can drink in balm
 From lovely objects for their loveliness alone.”

Paracelsus divines the hidden power, the sacred force at the centre of man, but his searching mind cannot rest on intuition alone—it must know. He must know what forces, co-operating from without with the hidden centre within, liberated truth and allowed its escape. He divined the secret at the centre of man’s being. He further aspired to know, to know what opened up the way for

God's intercourse with man—what effects the release of this truth locked in the flesh of man—what opens the way for the imprisoned splendour to escape—how this truth arises mysteriously as cloud of cape in air, he hungers to know. He divines the hidden treasure of man's being, divines much, must know more :

“ Dearest Michal, dearest Festus,” pleads Paracelsus,
“ What shall I say, if not that I desire
To justify your love ?

“ But one thing, Festus, Michal ! I have told
All I shall e'er disclose to mortal : say,
Do you believe I shall accomplish this ?

Festus. I do believe.

Michal. I ever did believe !

Paracelsus. Those words shall never fade from out
my brain !

This earnest of the end shall never fade !

Are there not, Festus, are there not, dear Michal,

Two points in the adventure of the diver,

One—when, a beggar, he prepares to plunge,

One—when, a prince, he rises with his pearl ?

Festus, I plunge !

Festus. We wait you when you rise.”

Book II. presents Paracelsus at Constantinople in the house of a Greek conjurer. He has found very little success in his quest to know ; he is now looking to magic to clear up this mystery of the pent-up power in man. The knowledge still escapes him, he feels his intellect insufficient ; he has overwrought his mind, lost his youth, spent his life vainly so far ; he is in a half-frenzy, fearing his mind itself is breaking down under the strain he has put upon it.

But while he despairs, he yet hopes, he believes in God as master-mind who will not allow his mind to go. But he is weary of this heaping up of knowledge ; he has come to a pause with it, and would scan for once the heights achieved ; he will sum up his gains so far because he has been told this is the way to future knowledge : he has set his fact and surmise confusedly together to come out as it may :

“ And yet those blottings chronicle a life,
 A whole life and my life ! Nothing to do,
 No problem for the fancy, but a life
 Spent and decided, wasted past retrieve
 Or worthy beyond peer.”

Paracelsus muses on his past, sums himself and his past up, recalls his friends :

“ Festus, my poor Festus, with his praise
 And counsel and grave fears.”

He remembers the past confession to Festus, and how life has consisted of one idea :

“ Ere that was master, up till that was born
 I bear a memory of a pleasant life
 Whose small events I treasure ; till one morn
 I ran o'er the seven little grassy fields,
 Startling the flocks and nameless birds, to tell
 Poor Festus, leaping all the while for joy
 To leave all trouble for my future plans
 Since I had just determined to become
 The greatest and most glorious man on earth,
 And since that morn all life has been forgotten
 All in one day. . . .”

Has it all been a mistake ? says Paracelsus ; but “ God is mind ” :

“ Unto the master-mind
 Mind should be precious.”

He feels frenzied :

“ Crush not my mind, dear God, though I be crushed.
 Give but one hour of my first energy,
 Of that invincible faith, but only one !
 That I may cover with an eagle glance
 The truths I have, and spy some certain way
 To mould them, and completing them possess.”

If he has strayed some warning would have reached him :

“ If my life has not been matured
 It had been monstrous. . . .”

“Have I after all,” he asks, “mistaken the wild nursling of my breast?”

“Knowledge it seemed, and power, and recompense.
Was she who glided through my room of nights,
Who laid my head on her soft knees and smoothed
The damp locks—whose sly soothings just began
When my sick spirit craved repose awhile—
God! was I fighting sleep off for death’s sake ?

“God! Thou art mind! Unto the master-mind
Mind should be precious. Spare my mind alone.”

As words exhaust themselves he hears a voice from within—a voice he recognises :

“I heard it in my youth when first
The waters of my life outburst.”

In lyrical perfection that call to poetry is confessed ; that call to join the wan troop, their promise of charity, the poets who lean in airy ring, conscious of their failure, trusting that he should speak :

“The message which our lips, too weak,
Refused to utter.
Here, where we sit, ever pursuing
Our weary task, ever renewing
Sharp sorrow, far from God who gave
Our powers, and man they could not save.”

With taunting words the singer Aprile enters. His words are wild ; he displays his gift of imagination to Paracelsus—tells him what love should have done, counsels Paracelsus to be moved no less to work the will of imagination, fit himself like some strong rare spirit, fettered to a stubborn body, endeavouring to subdue it and inform it with its own splendour.

“All this I would now do,” says Aprile :

“And I should say, this done, His sprites created,
God grants to each a sphere to be its world

Appointed with the various objects needed
 To satisfy its own particular want:
 So I create a world for these my shapes
 Fit to sustain their beauty and their strength."

Imagination, says Aprile, should do all this :

" I would love infinitely and be loved—
 All inanimate love expressed," he says;
 " I would throw down the pencil as the chisel,
 And I would speak; no thought which ever stirred
 A human breast should be untold."

In imaginative splendour the full aim of the poet is related, the glorifying of the natural world, the loving of all earth's domain, the wonder and beauty of Nature. But not upon these alone would his Art work :

" Not such alone:
 Should claim my care; for common life, its wants
 And ways would I set forth in beauteous hues:
 The lowest hind should not possess a hope,
 A fear, but I'd be by him, saying better
 Than he his own heart's language. I would live
 For ever in the thoughts I thus explored,
 As a discoverer's memory is attached
 To all he finds; they should be mine henceforth,
 Imbued with me, though free to all before:
 For clay, once cast into my soul's rich mine,
 Should come up crusted o'er with gems."

From Aprile Paracelsus learns the secret of love, the complement of perfect Power :

" Love me henceforth, Aprile, while I learn
 To love.
 Die not, Aprile! We must never part:
 Are we not halves of one dissevered world
 Whom this strange chance united once more?
 Part? Never! Till thou the lover know; and I, the
 knower
 Love—until both are saved.
 Love me henceforth, Aprile, while I learn to love.
 I too have sought to know as thou to Love,
 Excluding love as thou refusedst knowledge.
Aprile. Yes; I see now. God is the perfect poet.

Who in his person acts his own creations,
Had you but told me this at first.

Paracelsus. Thy spirit at least, Aprile! Let me love.
I have attained, and now I may depart.”

Book III. discloses Paracelsus and Festus alone at Basle : they recall and review the past. Paracelsus has won success in his work ; he has achieved popular success, yet is not sure ; he is famous, a professor ; his knowledge is his power, his opportunity seems to have come.

But is he satisfied? He asks : Is this really success? He is still unhappy, discontented, and filled with mockery of himself. He is talking to Festus, who thinks he has achieved supreme success, but Paracelsus feels it all a mockery, a fool’s paradise. He has still a wide overpowering ideal unsatisfied, a boundless passion of soul unrealised, and the real thing, truth, is still eluding him. He submits to it, he will do his best ; perhaps God does not give the supreme truth to man, but he has a hunger for this knowledge and cannot rest in his present limitations, and his duties do not attract him. He has lost faith in the old tasks ; he is fearful of failures, although his aims are still high ; he sees himself forced into compromise between life and his ideal ; he wants to destroy error, build up true knowledge.

Paracelsus lovingly recalls Michal : he asks Festus of her appearance now :

“ And Michal’s face,” he asks,
“ Still wears that quiet and peculiar light
Like the dim circlet floating round a pearl?
And yet her calm sweet countenance,
Though saintly, was not sad ; for she would sing
Alone. Does she still sing alone, bird-like,
Not dreaming you are near ? Her carols dropt
In flakes through that old leafy bower built under
The sunny wall at Wurtzberg, from her lattice
Among the trees above, while I, unseen,
Sat conning some rare scroll from Tritheim’s shelves,
Much wondering notes so simple could divert
My mind from study: Those were happy days.
Respect all such as sing when all alone.”

“ O very proud will Michal be of you,” answers Festus.
 “ Imagine how we sat long winter nights,
 Scheming and wondering, shaping your presumed
 Adventure, or devising its reward ;
 Shutting out fear with all the strength of hope.
 Can I forget the anxious voice which said :
 ‘ Festus, have thoughts like these ere shaped
 In other brains than mine ? were they themselves weak
 As I, or ever constant from the first,
 Despising youth’s allurements and rejecting
 As spider-films the shackles I endure ? ” ”

Paracelsus would rather talk of Michal and the home than of his triumphs ; it now seems pretentious and unsatisfying to lecture to as many thick-skulled brutes.

Festus fails to understand ; he has mingled with the crowd. Paracelsus is famous, he says ; this strange mood of self-depreciation he cannot understand. Paracelsus has knowledge and the rewards of knowledge, knowledge gleaned from books and travel, yet is discontented. He would change the theme of his successes ; he returns to the memory of home, asks after its pets of the garden : “ Do the rear-mice still hang like a fretwork on the gate ? ” So he questions.

Trifle not, says Festus. Why, he asks, not withdraw if he feels this defeat—why this mood ?

The wonders of Paracelsus as physician are confessed by Paracelsus ; he has done much. He relates the triumphs of his physician skill in discovery success and practice—yet has he failed. His old aims are gone, his old delights are superseded—to pause now from evil would prove his sincerity to them. Give heed to the warnings of one he has met who bade him serve his race at once ; but he asks more light, for—

“ God’s intimations rather fail in clearness
 Than in energy ; ’twere well did they indicate the
 Course to take like that to be forsaken.”

How change his nature ? says Paracelsus :

“ How can I change my soul ? this apparatus
 Constructed solely for their purposes
 So well adapted to their every want
 To search out, and discover, prove and perfect ;
 This intricate machine whose most minute
 And meanest motions have their charm to me.”

How change from pursuit of knowledge to love ? He remembers his past, when love was his aim, the poetry of love his food :

“ God ! ” he exclaims, “ how I essayed
 To live like that mad poet, for a while
 To love alone ; and how I felt too warped
 And twisted and deformed.

I cannot feed on beauty for the sake
 Of beauty alone, nor can drink in balm
 From lovely objects from their loveliness.
 My nature cannot lose her first imprint ;
 I still must hoard and heap and class all truths
 With one ulterior purpose : I must know !

I were happy could I quench
 This mad and thrivelless longing and content me
 With beauty for itself alone : alas !
 I have addressed a frock of heavy mail,
 Yet may not join the troop of sacred knights ;
 And now the forest creatures fly from me ;
 The grass-banks cool, the sunbeams warm me more.”

Festus thinks he understands : Paracelsus would return to his work ; this sense of failure in it is assumed ; he thinks Paracelsus is but frenzied and ill :

“ Have you learned nothing from to-day’s discussion ? ” says Paracelsus. “ There our communion ends. Will you divine nothing ? Must I lay bare my heart hideous and beating, or tear up my vitals for your gaze, ere you will deem enough made known ? You, who are you forsooth ? Will you guess nothing ? Will you spare me nothing ? Must I go deeper ? Ay or no ? ”

How explain that, although a failure, Paracelsus proposes to still go on ?

" I would have been—something, I know not what;
 But though I cannot soar I do not crawl.
 I had immortal feelings; such shall never
 Be wholly quenched—better talk trivialities."

" Such talk is wasted," says Paracelsus.

" 'Twere better we discuss
 News from Lucerne or Zurich; ask and tell
 Of Egypt's flaring sky or Spain's cork-grows."

" Trust me," says Festus soothingly.

He soothes what he believes to be but the fears of Paracelsus, he warns him of the idolatries and blindnesses of the too great fear of love—this exaltation of love, this new mood of Paracelsus, alarms him—he would subdue these ambitions to love exceptionally.

" Come," says Paracelsus, " I will show you where my merit lies:
 'Tis in the advance of individual minds
 That the slow crowd should ground their expectation
 Eventually to follow; as the sea
 Waits ages in its bed till some one wave
 Out of the multitudinous mass, extends
 The empire of the whole, some feet perhaps
 Over the strip of sand which could confine
 Its fellows so long time."

But why so sure of himself now after such doubts? asks Festus; why this new certainty of better knowledge? And why does he but argue? why did he not burn the old authorities? Paracelsus states a parallel case: Pray, does Luther dream his arguments, convince by their own force the crowds that own his doctrine? No indeed; Luther's way is his way, he declares:

" Boldly deny
 There is much breath-stopping, hair stiffening
 Awhile; then amazed gladness, mute awaiting
 The thunderbolt which does not come."

They talk the night away, and are no nearer in spirit. Festus feels Paracelsus speak so strangely, he is fearful;

he recalls the childhood of Paracelsus, reminds him of their faith :

“ It is our trust
That there is yet another world to mend
All error and mischance.”

Why deprecate knowledge of this life? God's intelligence, says Paracelsus, casts our mind into immeasurable shade. “ No! No!” he exclaims—he sees his failure :

“ Love, hope, fear, faith, those make humanity;
These are its sign and note and character
And these I have lost.”

Festus begs Paracelsus to call him to his side :

“ If this mood
Shall pass away, if light once more arise
Where all is darkness now, if you see fit
To hope and trust again . . .
Will you not call me to your side, dear Aureole ?”

Book IV. presents Paracelsus and Festus again in consultation; the scene is an inn at Colmar. Paracelsus has sent for Festus in fulfilment of his promise to call him when any further light had arisen. He had sent for him to tell him he is now deposed from his professorship, the admiring crowds have ceased to acclaim the wonders of his skill, he no longer pleases them, others have filched his secrets, he is packing up to go away, he now has other purposes; his case is not uncommon, says Paracelsus :

“ The case of men cast off by those they sought to benefit.”

Festus recalls vague rumours : he had heard some priest, for instance :

“ Cured by your skill, who wrangled at your claim.”

“ And the affair of Liechtenfels,” replies Paracelsus,
“ How soon my words have come true !

Saul is among
 The prophets! Just so long as I was pleased
 To play off the mere antics of my art,
 Fantastic gambols leading to no end,
 I got huge praise.”

Paracelsus analyses the motives that had kept his disciples to him—all from self-interest, he shows, desire to find support for some tenet of their own : “ I had a trust in them ” :

“ I must needs begin
 To teach them, not amaze them, to impart
 The spirit which should instigate the search
 Of truth—the end was a clear class room.”

Paracelsus analyses the passions of men—to love, to know : but, he asks, “ Has ever one stumbled, in his search, on any signs of a nature in us formed to hate? ”

“ Is Paracelsus to shrink up like a crushed snail,” he asks, “ to undergo in silence, and desist from former toil? ” He is tired of men’s contempt of his claim to superior knowledge ; he has changed—now Festus shall divine ! “ But I am merely setting out once more, embracing my earliest aims again ! ”

“ Your aims ? the aims ? to know,” enquires Festus.

“ And where is found the early trust.”

“ Nay, not so fast,” says Paracelsus : “ I say,
 The old aims—not the old means. . . .
 Not but they had their beauty, who should know
 Their passing beauty, if not I ? Still dreams
 They were, so let them vanish, yet in beauty
 If that may be. Stay : thus they pass in song ! ”

Old aims, old dreams, are buried with lyrical splendour, their grave fragrantly heaped with

“ Cassia, sandal-buds and stripes
 Of labdanum and aloe balls
 And faint sweetness from some old
 Egyptian’s fine worm-eaten shroud.
 On this lyric pile old dreams shall die,
 My lovely fancies, with fair perished things
 Themselves fair and forgotten.”

Festus is apprehensive of this change ; he feels despair to hear these incoherent words and

“ This flushed cheek and intensely sparkling eye.”

But Paracelsus is filled with joy at the return of his old imaginative gift :

“ I make songs.

‘Tis the very augury of success I want !

Why should I not be joyous now as then ?

Suppose my labour should seem God’s own cause

Once more as first I dreamed.”

Imagination has returned to Paracelsus, indignation spurs him, the rejection of him no longer wounds ; he has changed, has other aims now :

“ I thankfully retire. This life of mine

Must be lived out and a grave thoroughly earned.”

He pictures his new quest, betaking to study again—

“ Till patient searchings after hidden lore

Half wrung some bright truth from its prison.”

He revels in anticipation of the truth he is to capture—the cup to quaff that chases sorrow ! “ I lapse back into youth and take again my fluttering pulse, for evidence that God means good to me, will make my cause his own.”

“ Have you never mused ?” says Festus, beginning to better divine :

“ Never said

I had a noble purpose and the strength

To compass it ; but I have stopped half-way

And wrongly given the first fruits of my soul

To objects little worthy of the gift ?”

“ Have I, you ask ?” says Paracelsus :

“ Have I, you ask ?

Often at midnight, when most fancies come

Would some such airy project visit me

But ever at the end—or will you hear

The same thing in a tale, a parable ?”

For Festus, Paracelsus makes the song of the voyagers pushing on in boundless strength and hope, the parable of the men building to discomfiture and disillusion, yet changeless :

“ Our work is done ; we have no heart
To mar our work, we cried.”

To Festus is sung the song of the men who could not change their minds :

“ The sad rhyme of the men who proudly clung
To their first fault, and withered in their pride.”

Festus pleads for common sense to return to Paracelsus. Why this boundless trust of Paracelsus in his new choice? But his remonstrances weary Paracelsus :

“ I am weary,
I know not how ; not even the wine cup soothes my
brain to-night. . . .
Do you not thoroughly despise me, Festus ?
No flattery. . . .
Do you not scorn me from your heart of hearts,
Me and my cant, each petty subterfuge,
My rhymes and all this frothy shower of words ?”

Paracelsus learns that Michal is dead : “ I will give you no julep to cheat the grave,” says Paracelsus, but a far better secret :

“ I have thought much of it:
For I believe we do not wholly die. . . .

There is a reason
For what I say : I think the soul can never
Taste death. I am just now, as you may see,
Very unfit to put so strange a thought
In an intelligible dress of words ;
But take it as my trust, she is not dead.”

Book V. reveals Paracelsus lying dying in a cell at the Hospital of St. Sebastian at Salzburg.

Fifteen years have passed. The faithful Festus is again with him. He has watched the night out beside the un-

conscious Paracelsus ; he muses over the ruined life he sees—he questions God's goodness : why has He brought such intellect to wreck ? Paracelsus hears imaginary voices' questions of the Aprile's chanting, murmurs of a fate that gave him but hissing and contempt, scorn and derisive laughter.

He talks to the imaginary Aprile, confides the emptiness of fame. In delirious dream he begs for the care of Aprile ; he asks a boon of God, forgiveness for his daring :

“ Rather give
The supernatural consciousness of strength
Which fed my youth ! Only one hour of that
With thee to help—And what should bar me then ? ”

Delirium overtakes him, he talks to Aprile again. Festus recalls him, but his imagination figures Michal again and the early home :

“ Thank her for me,
Dear Michal ! See how bright St. Saviour's spire
Flames in the sunset. . . . ”

To recall his wandering sense, Festus speaks of the river he loved, brings poetry and song to the disordered mind ; he sings of the softly flowing Mayne, of rhythm and soft repose of its birds and waving grasses—marshals in lyrical loveliness the old landscape again to charm the wandering mind of Paracelsus.

“ My heart ! they loose my heart, those simple words,” replies Paracelsus with calmed mind : “ its darkness passes, which naught else could touch.”

Rational and composed, Paracelsus comes to see Festus at his side ; his reasoning mind traverses the past—he recalls his life to Festus, his old purpose :

“ You here,
I thus ! But no more trifling : I see all,
I know all : my last mission shall be done
If strength suffice.”

He rises from his couch, asks for his scarlet gown :

“ The chain about my neck ; my signet ring
 Is still upon my hand, I think—even so.
 Lastly my good sword, ah ! trusty Azoth, leapest
 Beneath thy master’s grasp for the last time ?
 This couch shall be my throne : I bid these walls
 Be consecrate, this wretched cell become
 A shrine, for here God speaks to men through me.”

This peroration recorded Browning’s conception of the evolutionary process ; it presents the ordered steps as now formulated, tracing the uprise from the planetary emergence, its preparation for life, the frozen stillness dissolving under the breath of the spring—the appearance of spring clothing earth with verdure, the awakening of life’s minutest beginnings up to the consummation of man.

But marvel as man appears, says this hypothesis of Browning. His evolution has a further stretch before it ; his poet’s imagination pictures the material being of man, as the theatre of a further evolutionary step, transfers the evolutionary process from the body to a further arena of soul : to develop the powers of this deeper being, to open up the way for its escape, to bring it into a further environment that it may develop for a future existence, is the further forecast of the evolutionary scheme of Paracelsus—from the upsweep of life to man, from the intuitions so developed in man, up to the completed hypothesis of man’s further upsweep of soul, to the end of a further being—the immortal spirit of man. Without the co-operation and fulfilment by man, the scheme, says Paracelsus, is a failure and the plan abortive in its Creator’s hand : to be spiritually evolving for eternity while yet cloistered by time, to conform to the limitations of earth while pushing beyond them to the liberties of Heaven, says Paracelsus in peroration, is man’s true purpose, path, and fate that he set out to know.

In showing Paracelsus defeated and brought low by egoistic intellectual pride in the early stages of his career,

Browning undoubtedly drew upon his own early stages recorded in “ Pauline.” Though he could not prove his hypothesis, he could protest for it : “ Boldly deny,” was the method of Paracelsus. “ I go to prove my soul,” was his challenge to the future—“ I shall emerge one day ”; his prophecy is amply fulfilled. He could protest for man’s soul, its future existence and spirit flight ; he ventured his own soul into the blue, trusting to its intuitions.

In the peroration of Paracelsus he presents the intuition of soul. What God was to the earth when a wintry clod—in the spring-time of its life the wind, like a dancing psaltress, touching to bud and rare verdure where it blew—the dawn of infinitesimal life—so God dwells for further creation :

“ God is the perfect poet who in his person
Acts his own creations.”

Lastly in the scheme evolved Imagination : “ His sprites created, God grants to each a sphere to be its world, appointed with the various objects needed to satisfy its own peculiar want.”

From Aprile’s partial failure he learned his own deep error, his failure to reach out from this inmost centre, in himself through love to all humanity ; in an arrogant self-reliance Paracelsus had perished : from his early failure he saw his deep error :

“ In my own heart love had not been made wise
To trace love’s faint beginnings in mankind,
To know even hate is but a mask of love,
To see a good in evil, and a hope
In ill-success ; to sympathise, be proud
Of their half-reasons, faint aspirings, dim struggles for
truth—
All with a touch of nobleness, despite
Their error, upward tending all, though weak
Like plants in mines which never saw the sun,
But dream of him, and guess where he may be
And do their best to climb and get to him.
All this I knew not, and I failed.

" In completed man," says Paracelsus,
 " Begins anew a tendency to God :

So in man's self arise

August anticipations, symbols, types
 Of a dim splendour ever on before
 In that eternal cycle life pursues.

God is glorified in man
 And to man's glory vowed I soul and limb.
 I failed ; I gazed on power till I grew blind.
 Power ; I could not take my eyes from that.
 I saw no use in the past, only a scene
 Of degradation, ugliness and tears,
 The record of disgraces best forgotten,
 A sullen page in human chronicles

Fit to erase.

What wonder if I saw no way to shun
 Despair ? The power I sought for man seemed God's.
 In this conjuncture, as I prayed to die
 A strange adventure made me know one sin
 Had spotted my career from its uprise."

In his past despair, confessed Paracelsus to Festus, a whisper had come—a voice which had shown him this deep error, the secret of his impotency which came, said the voice :

" Even from thy strength, consider, hast thou gazed
 Presumptuously on wisdom's countenance,
 No veil between ?"

From the failure of Aprile Paracelsus had learned the cause of his undoing. Aprile had half the secret—love ; he half the secret—knowledge ; he learned the secret of a united and perfect whole. Paracelsus the knower united to Aprile the lover. " Meanwhile," concludes Paracelsus :

" I have done well, though not all well.
 'Tis for their good and therefore fit awhile
 That they reject the weak and scorn the false
 Rather than praise the strong and true, in me,
 But after they will know me. If I stoop
 Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
 It is but for a time ; I press God's lamp
 Close to my breast, its splendour, soon or late
 Will pierce the gloom : I shall emerge one day."

“I go to prove my soul,” says Paracelsus, in words indissolubly connected with the personality of Browning :

“I go to prove my soul!
I see my way as birds their trackless way.
I shall arrive! what time, what circuit first,
I ask not: but unless God sends his hail
Of blinding fireballs, sleet or stifling snow,
In some time, his good time, I shall arrive.”

What drew Browning from the Slough of Despond he pictures his life struggling in, in the poem of “Pauline,” to the firm ground, the sure purpose, the lofty note of faith, in this next poem of “Paracelsus,” we have no means of knowing except through his Art. What changed the despairing cry of “Pauline” to the clear aspirations of “Paracelsus”; what dispelled the baffled egoism of the one for the serene altruism of the other; what lifted his soul out of its conflicting aims, confused ambitions, shadowy guidances, struggling purpose, to the clear vision—that point of view from the blue, wide as a bird’s vision, sure as its flight through the trackless air to its goal—is his own secret, disclosed alone through the windows of his Art.

CHAPTER V

DRAMATIC WORKS

Acquaintance with Macready, John Forster, Mr. Serjeant Talfourd—Suggestions of play—Tragedy of “ Strafford ” accepted—“ Strafford ” produced—Disappointments connected with production of dramatic work—Hopes of dramatic success crushed.

THE publication of “ Paracelsus ” brought a friend to Browning who was now to direct his energies to dramatic writing for the stage. It was on November 29th, 1835, that Browning met the great man of the day, Macready the great tragedian, who told him how much “ Paracelsus ” had “ bit ” him, and how eager he had been to meet the author of it and to help his genius; to be able to help one he so much admired would be some small recompense for the humiliations and trials he had endured in his profession.

The phenomenal success of Mr. Serjeant Talfourd with his tragedy of “ Ion ” fired Browning to seek an outlet for his energies and ambitions by way of the drama.

The subject was discussed with Macready, but the play outlined, “ The Return of the Druses,” did not commend itself to him.

The play of “ Strafford ” was apparently evoked by the suggestion of Macready, who asked for a play from Browning after a supper given to the famous author of “ Ion,” when good feeling was running high. But the materials for the play of “ Strafford ” lay ready for working up in Browning’s mind, as he had just completed an article on Strafford for the “ Cabinet Cyclopædia,” to help his friend John Forster, who had fallen ill, and was unable to keep his contract to do it.

Browning wrote the article for him, to help him out, and for years it went as the work of Forster. But in April, 1890, Dr. Furnivall published the truth of the authorship of the article, as it was being curiously commented on, and the suggestion made that Browning had used Forster's ideas, so closely did the play follow the conclusions of the article. The truth was made known by Dr. Furnivall, after the remark of a member of the Browning Society that it was curious how closely Browning had followed Forster's "*Life of Strafford.*" "Yes," replied Dr. Furnivall, "because he wrote it."

The play was written at white heat, and produced at Covent Garden Theatre on May 1st, 1837. It was brilliantly acted but shamefully mounted, and, from a combination of causes unconnected with the merit of the play, —had to be withdrawn after a run of five nights only.

The tragedy of "*Strafford*" follows the contest between Charles I. and his Parliament—it displays that epoch in English history when Thomas Wentworth, who was created Earl of Strafford by Charles I., supported the King in his attempt to suppress the rebellion of the Scots against the imposing of the religion of Laud upon them, which the King designed to do at the sword's point.

The play pictures the struggle between Charles and the party of Pym : it is the picture of the conflict in a man's breast of two overpowering loyalties—the personal loyalty of Strafford to Charles, and his personal and ideal loyalty to his dream of creating an Imperial England. The times demanded a fierce taking of sides; devotion to Charles triumphed with Strafford, and he was rewarded by betrayal to the block by his weak Sovereign.

Browning's picture of Charles I. is of a personality weak and despicable, treacherous to public and private duty. He portrays Strafford as racked between loyalty to King and loyalty to country, and he draws a picture of Pym torn between loyalty to his old friend Strafford and loyalty to the interests of his country. This struggle is

related dramatically by Browning in his first acted play, the tragedy of "Strafford."

"Time is now," says the play, "to turn the record's
last and bloody leaf,
Which, chronicling a nation's great despair,
Tells they were long rebellious, and their lord
Indulgent, till, all kind expedients tried,
He drew the sword in them and reigned in peace.
Laud's laying his religion on the Scots
Was the last gentle entry
. . . Heaven grows dark above—
Let's snatch one moment ere the thunder fall,
To say how well the English spirit comes out
Beneath it."

Scene 1.

From Pym the last sacrifice is exacted for England's sake—his youth's friendship with Strafford. Pym :

"Have I done well? Speak, England! Whose sole sake
I still have laboured for, with disregard
To my own heart,—for whom my youth was made
Barren, my manhood waste, to offer up
Her sacrifice—this friend, this Wentworth here—
Who walked in youth with me, loved me, it may be,
And whom, for his forsaking England's cause,
I hunted by all means, even to the block."

The play of "Strafford" was dedicated to Macready, a memorial of the then affectionate relations between author and producer so soon to be hopelessly reversed.

Browning had submitted his first play, "King Victor and King Charles," to Macready, who was very hard to please; then he had read "The Return of the Druses," but declined it for production. He accepted "Strafford," and in Macready's Journal is to be seen the mortification and disappointment Browning had to endure to win the great man's approval of his work. Macready records in his diary the vicissitudes of its acceptance :

"Forster, Poole, and I," he writes, "went over the play of 'Strafford,' altered, omitted, and made up one new scene: we were occupied from 11 till 4 o'clock.

" Browning assented to the alterations. In playing the great game before him, he should regard this as a trivial offence, and to dismiss it. He was oppressed and incapable of amending the alterations and *wished to withdraw it*. He looked very unwell—jaded and thought sick.

" He evinced irritable impatience of the reproduction of ' Strafford '—he now asks me to study a speech at the end of the second act, and an entire scene, which I am to restore, in the fourth act. Such a selfish, absurd, and useless imposition to lay upon me could scarcely have entered into anyone's imagination. I was at first disgusted by the sickly and fretful overestimate of his work, and was very angry, but reflected that he did not know what he was about, and had forgotten what I had done. I shall not do it."

What the joint skill of Macready, Forster, and Poole effected upon the play we have no record of. It was published in 1837, fourth act included, together with the speeches omitted at its production.

Arising out of the production of this tragedy by Macready a blow was struck at the friendship of Browning and Forster. When " Strafford " was produced, Forster, who was theatrical critic for the *Examiner*, reviewed it, and claimed to be very much hurt by Browning's discontent with his critique. " After all that has been done for Browning by us," he wrote. " Forster is very unsafe," writes Macready in his diary (August 26th, 1839). He called and told me of Browning's intemperance over the play. " Certainly Forster seems to be the blameable party," he adds.

So great was the feeling between Browning and Forster that the Journal records a scene at a dinner-party, where the " usually amiable Robert Browning, stung beyond endurance, seized a heavy cut-glass decanter, and was only prevented hurling it across the table by the intervention of his host."

From May, 1837, to February, 1843, the disappointments and rebuffs of Browning connected with his attempt to produce dramatic works for the stage continued. From it came nothing but failure and disillusion, and

strained relations with Macready and Forster, and the loss of the week-end visits to Elstree, the country-house of Macready, where the brilliant little poem, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" had been written to please "W. Macready the younger," to whom it was dedicated—the poem perhaps which first piped Browning into the general mind.

"King Victor and King Charles" is a tragedy founded on the fates of two Kings of Sicily, father and son. The tragedy of their lives was presented by Browning—the struggles, cruelties, jealousies of a father and son, in medieval times in Sicily. It was presented for Macready's approval during Browning's first attempts to win success by direct dramatic writing for the stage; it found no favour with the great man, and remained in the well-filled desk till drawn out to be the second number of "Bells and Pomegranates."

"The Return of the Druses," also rejected by Macready, was never played—it formed the fourth number of "Bells and Pomegranates."

The play is the story of a tragedy of apparent imposture. A man, daring, of heroic nature, is led on to a great position, acclaimed by his people; he is their leader, their superior. He is among people who look for the reincarnation of their God; he half believes his own divinity by the success of his every endeavour. His country acclaims him as superior. The multitude confirm it by a worship of his powers.

The first act reveals a secret meeting of the Druses, who have been initiated into the mysteries. It was allowed to them to conceal their secret mysteries at any price. They were all things to all men; they worshipped with the sects around indifferently, in order to conceal their secrets; outward profession with all faiths was allowed. The initiated might be men or women—the Druse woman shares the education and advantages of the men; Anael in brain and purpose is the peer of Djabal.

The Druses are a people of Syria remarkable for the pertinacity and success with which they have defended their independence against the encroachments of Turkish supremacy, and for the profession of a form of religious belief which, in the words of Dean Milman, "is one of the most extraordinary aberrations which ever extensively affected the mind of man. They are mysterious people, and in spite of the great additions made to our knowledge in the present century, many important questions in regard to them still await solution. According to opinion, they derive their name from a Court of Dreux, and are mainly the descendants of a band of Crusaders who were left behind, and who finally forgot their country and language and creed; but this story is disproved by the mention of their existence at an earlier date. In the year 996 Hakim began to reign. He believed that he held direct intercourse with the Deity, or even that he was an incarnation of the Divine intelligence." In Hakim it was believed a final appeal was made to mankind; no further incarnation can take place till the tribulation of the faithful has reached its height, when Hakim will reappear to conquer the world and render his religion supreme.

The tragedy of "The Return of the Druses" is the story of a colony of Druses settled in an islet of the southern Sporades. The sufferings of the banished band have reached their height, and their belief is at its height that the God Hakim will come, according to promise, to deliver them. A young Druse, Djabal, is fired with the noble purpose of restoring his countrymen to their land. His father perished in an insurrection there, and had to flee to Europe, and the exiled son declares his intention of becoming the liberator of his race. The Prefect appointed to govern the island is cruel and tyrannical, and it is determined to slay him. Lois de Dreux is a friend passing a period of probation in the island, and the Venetians have promised assistance in conducting the exiled Druses to their native land after the rising. There is a maiden,

Anael, devoted to her country, who declares she can only marry the man who will liberate her people from the oppression of the Prefect. The young Druse Djabal claims more than human powers—he asserts himself to be the long-expected Hakim who is to appear and liberate his people from their tyrannical governor.

The monstrous deception becomes too much for him to support. He has lost the first flush of faith which, firing his heart, deceived him at first into believing his own claims to divinity. As the heats of imagination lessen, he feels less faith in himself, but decides to be true to his people at whatever costs by killing the Prefect and then seek his safety in flight. He meets Anael only to learn that she herself has killed their oppressor, and in a burst of sorrow at this result, tells her of his deception, that he is not the God Hakim, only Djabal the man. She urges him to retract his assertions of divinity, to disclose his deception. This is impossible to him. She revenges herself by denouncing his fraud. He is brought to trial, his principal accuser being Anael, who is called upon to expose her lover's imposture. Her word means life or death to him—will she deny his Divine claim? As she sees him her woman's love surges to the height of sacrificing herself for him—she exclaims, “Hakim,” establishing his divinity, and falls dead. Djabal stabs himself and falls dying beside her.

The drama “A Blot on the ‘Scutcheon’” was Browning’s last attempt to win success by direct dramatic presentation on the stage. The history of its production was one from which he retired discomfited and humiliated.

In 1843 Browning’s tragedy “A Blot on the ‘Scutcheon’” was produced by Macready: “Made very valuable improvements at rehearsal,” he records in his diary (January 20th, 1843). It was produced, but so cut down, so staged, that failure was inevitable, in spite of the acting of Phelps and Miss Faucit.

Macready was pressed by financial embarrassments, was

reluctant to produce the play, and carried it out perfunctorily—the collapse was inevitable. Of the matter Browning himself writes : “ One friendly straightforward word to the effect that what was intended for an advantage would, under circumstances of which I was altogether ignorant, prove the reverse—how easy to have spoken, and what regret it would have spared us both.”

The production of the play “ *A Blot on the ’Scutcheon* ” at Drury Lane caused a complete break in the friendship of Browning and Macready. The history of it is given in a letter by Joseph Arnold to Alfred Domett :

“ Those who knew Browning,” he wrote, “ were well aware of the history of bad feeling, intrigue, and petty resentment connected with it. Friends had a habit of asking Browning when the play was coming out—he forced Macready to name an early date for playing it. Everything was going on swimmingly, when Macready declines altogether his part, unless the play can be postponed after Easter. Browning with haughty coolness indicates that Mr. Phelps will take the part. Macready appears, hints that he has studied the part and will act the first night. Robert declines positively to take the part from Mr. Phelps—imagine the fury and the whirlwind.”

Macready had proposed to cut down and alter the play, as had been done with “ *Strafford*. ” Browning was angry, and the explanation of it all, the long delay in its production, was that Macready was in financial difficulties and wished to draw out of his promise to produce it.

× Dickens had read the manuscript of “ *A Blot on the ’Scutcheon* ” and wrote enthusiastically of it to Forster :

“ It is full of genuine material and great thoughts, profound and yet simple and beautiful in its vigour. I swear that it is a tragedy that must be played—and if you tell Browning that I have seen it, tell him that I believe from my soul there is no man living (and not many dead) who could produce such a work.”

Browning saw this opinion of him in Forster’s “ *Life of Dickens* ” when it was published years later. “ Why,”

he asked, " did Forster not show this letter to me when praise from such a quarter would have meant so much to me ? "

" A Blot on the 'Scutcheon' " was printed as the fifth number of " Bells and Pomegranates." Thus ended the friendship that had given such warmth and colour to Browning's life.

On March 18th, 1843, is the entry in Macready's diary : " Met Browning, who was startled into accosting me, but seeming to remember that he did not intend to do so, started off in great haste. O God ! how is it all to end ? "

On June 4th, 1846, is the entry : " Went to Mrs. Proctor's ball, saw Browning, who did not speak to me." This estrangement was bridged in old age, and Browning wrote an appreciation of Macready for Mr. William Archer's " Life of Macready." It was so true, so fitting to the conflicting character of the great tragedian, that Mr. Archer writes in admiration, after quoting it : " Macready in a nutshell ! "

One of the great friendships of Browning's life grew out of this connection with the stage—that of Sir Theodore and his wife, Lady Martin, who, as Helen Faucit, played the part of Lady Carlisle and Colombe. Many of the poet's holidays were spent at their country home in the Vale of Llangollen, one described by himself as " delightful weeks—each tipped with a sweet starry Sunday at the little Church leading to the House Beautiful where we took our rest of an evening " (" Life of Browning," by Professor Dowden).

Here in the little church of Llangollen Lady Martin placed a memorial of Browning, probably the first raised to him, and, in the fitness of things, in a little church and by the hand of a woman.

The last attempt at production for the stage was " Colombe's Birthday," written for Charles Kean. The production of this carried the stipulation that it was not

to be printed till it was acted, but matter was needed for the sixth number of "Bells and Pomegranates," so Browning determined to use it for that, and forgo its chances on the stage.

The play of "Luria" was in hand in 1845, the year of the opening of the momentous friendship of the poet with Miss Barrett. Of "Luria" and the "Soul's Tragedy" the poet gives his own opinion in letters to Miss Barrett.

The tragedy "Luria" and "A Soul's Tragedy," form the last number of "Bells and Pomegranates."

Of "Luria" we have Browning's own opinion. He was entirely irritated by it, he wrote to Miss Barrett—he decided it was a failure, a mere piece of clever recapitulation; the attempt to reproduce, by the intellect, something that had been perceived by the soul and allowed to pass away. Whatever irritated or annoyed him (he wrote here, as in a previous letter to her) had to be thrown out of him: "When I am hurt I must write it out—must!"

In writing "Luria," he said, he thought more of "his flax than his singing"—unlike the woman at the spinning-wheel, who thought more of her singing than her flax.

The character of Ogniben turned to another thing altogether from that conceived, he wrote. He was to have been a man of wide speculation but narrow practice, a universalist and individualist in one. Theology was to have come in; the belief in a future state was to have been shown, modifying every feeling of this life. He was to have been an epicurean, declining epicureanism from strength of conviction—as a man may decline wine for various reasons, and still be a good judge of wine. All that was forgotten, he wrote, and only the shadow of the meaning passed into the play. Domizia was all stiff and unmanageable too. ("Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, 1845-46.")

In 1863 Browning's debt of gratitude to John Forster

for his early encouragement of him after "Paracelsus" appeared, was paid by a dedication in the collected edition of his work in 1863 :

"I dedicate these volumes to my old friend John Forster, glad and grateful that he who, from its first publication of the various poems they include, has been their promptest and staunchest helper should seem even nearer to me now than almost 30 years ago (London, April 21st, 1863)."

CHAPTER VI

“SORDELLO”

Visit to Italy—Production of long poem relating the struggle for independence with the Huns—The army of the Kaiser against the army of the Pope—Review of the struggle as background—A study of the development of a soul in the foreground—Amid Italy’s art and beauty and patriotism—Humanity his mistress—Call of the people.

BROWNING paid his first visit to Italy in 1837 ; he was then at work upon the poem of “Sordello.” This was the first of his poems projected after the suppression of “Pauline,” but it was put aside for the writing of “Paracelsus,” and completed on his return from Italy.

But all that we know of the real Sordello, medieval troubadour, says Dr. Berdoe in his “Browning Encyclopædia,” is that

“He was a troubadour of the thirteenth century, mentioned by his contemporary Rolandin, who states that he eloped with Cuniza, wife of Count Richard de Saint Boniface. Some of his poems still survive, and from them a few more facts relating to the poet may be gleaned, and that is the whole of our real knowledge of him.”

Of this troubadour, medieval poet, and patriot, Sordello, the predececer of Dante, very little is known, and that mostly legendary or derived from Dante, where in the “Purgatoria” the shade of Virgil addresses him in lofty strain, and the spirit of Sordello accompanies them on their way in lofty converse. Dante ascribes to him the quality of patriotism and pride in his country, but, says Cary, a translator of Dante’s “Divina Commedia,” “the history of Sordello’s life is wrapped in the obscurity of Romance.”

All that vast background of Italian life, the beauty of

Italy, the historical struggle between Guelf and Ghibelline, which Dante so passionately engaged in at a later date—all that vast canvas of the scene was, in the purpose of the poem, just the setting required for the history of a soul, as the dedication directs it to be considered. Six hundred years ago the circumstances of Italy were at that stage in Italian history when—

“ The Second Friedrich wore
The purple, and the Third Honorius filled
The holy chair ”

—that long struggle between the Kaiser and the Pope, Ghibelline and Guelf.

On November 22nd, 1220, the Pope made peace with Frederick II., and he was crowned at St. Peter's with his wife, swearing to accord full liberty to the Church and to undertake a Crusade. This he postponed from time to time, endeavouring to establish himself more firmly in Sicily. The names Guelf and Ghibelline were the fighting cries of the Pope and the Kaiser respectively.

The Italians sank their own internal jealousies in resistance of the Germans overrunning their land in attempt of conquest; the Lombard League was formed by the supporters of the Pope to resist the soldiers of the Kaiser.

The Guelfs were animated by zeal of a national patriotism; they resisted from patriotism, as well as religion, the incursions of the Kaiser. Each State sank its struggles for local supremacy to meet the common foe—the hordes of the Kaiser pouring into Italy to ravage and destroy and set up its flag for the Kaiser Frederick II. Over their camps floated the standard of Ghibelline, over the camp of the Guelf floated the banner of the Pope. The Ghibelline cause represented the conquering one at that time; its soldiers were trained to arms and in the pay of Frederick, or were Italian revolutionaries banded together to oppose constitutional progress or reform. The Guelf party stood for civil liberty, democracy, liberal laws

in industry and commerce, national unity, religion, patriotism ; their war-cry the Pope, the spiritual and the national side, as against that of the Kaiser, the enemy of the spiritual, the invader, the despoiler, the denier of Italy's rights of ownership.

The Kaiser's representatives, under the leadership of Taurello Salinguerra, were in the ascendant when the poem of “ Sordello ” opens. The leader of the Guelfs, Richard Boniface, had been kidnapped, and the party was without a head, as Eccelin Romano, the representative of the Pope, had grown tired of the trouble with the Huns pouring in from the North, and had “ slunk into a convent,” leaving his wife Adelaide to do the best she could for herself and her sons at the mountain castle of Goito, their fortress on the northern frontier. Here Adelaide brought up her two sons, and Palma, daughter of a great Guelf house, also bereft of its head. Here, too, is brought Sordello in his infancy with his mother, who had just escaped with her life and infant from one of the Ghibelline raids. The mother, Retrude, dies, leaving Sordello, who is supposed to be the son of one Elcorte, a humble archer, but is really the son of the great Taurello Salinguerra himself ; but this truth is suppressed by the haughty Adelaide, who, in jealous mother-love, designs place and power for her own sons, and condemns Sordello to grow up in loneliness and under restrictions to suit his supposed origin from Elcorte, the archer.

Here the boy nourishes his soul in its loneliness upon the beauty of Nature and art and love, in secret worship of Palma, the beautiful girl under the guardianship of Adelaide. In one long introspective dream his nature develops from boyhood to manhood.

The poem gives us a picture of the method of medieval times to bring its people together for contests and for the exchange of news.

The Courts of Love and the contests of the troubadours for “ best place ” were part of the romantic procedure of

medieval times. There contested questions of love were settled; there poets strove together in a rhythmical dialogue upon a given theme in poetical contest before the assembled beauties, led by the patroness of the Castle, who adjudicated the prize; there the news of the day was passed round. It was at the Love Court of Adelaide at Goito—at which Palma, young and beautiful, presided—that Sordello, taking up the contest with Eglamor, sprang to “first place” by his extemporary “Song of Apollo,” filling up each foolish gap and chasm “the other bard left in his enthusiasm.”

Eglamor, the contesting poet, was the type of poet who sings for singing’s sake, is artist without success, and dies under rebuff and failure. He had historical personality, his name is mentioned as Chief Troubadour of Richard Boniface.

Palma, the beautiful girl growing up beside Sordello, under the care of Adelaide at the secluded Castle of Goito, was the feminine out soul of Sordello, the inspirer of his dreams of young love, the rewarder at the Court of Love, the diviner of his genius, the expounder of the country’s needs, his leader into the contest of the time. Palma, with the rich sensuous appeal of feminine beauty to his youth :

“ How the tresses curled into a sumptuous swell of gold
and wound
About her like a glory! even the ground
Was bright as with spilt sunbeams, . . .
The languid blood lies heavily; yet calm
On her slight prop, each flat and outspread palm
As but suspended in the act to rise
By consciousness of beauty, whence her eyes
Turn with so frank a triumph for she meets
Apollo’s gaze in the pine glooms.”

Palma, who was later to give him the prize he won in contest with Eglamor at the Love Court, and, as she leaned to him, placed her scarf on his shoulder :

“ Neck’s warmth as well.”

Palma, now grown woman, who was to be his reward from the great Salinguerra if he would embrace the cause of the Ghibellines, and carry the badge of the Kaiser, embrace the cause which promised immediate success, place, and material power, as against the cause of the Guelfs, then apparently beaten and dispersed.

And here is Salinguerra, an historical figure of the time. He was a great leader of the Ghibelline party, sixty years of age, triumphant, the great man of the day. The art of Browning evokes him :

“ With his hopes and fears
 Of sixty years—yet you would say
 ’Twas a youth nonchalantly looked away
 . . . so agile, quick
 And graceful, turned the head on the broad chest
 Encased in pliant steel—and looseness of its tire
 Of steel, that head let breathe the comely brown
 Large massive locks discoloured as if a crown
 Encircled them ” . . .

“ Glossy above, glossy below it swept
 Curling and fine about a brow thus kept
 Calm, laid coat upon coat, marble and sound.

“ Square faced,
 No lion more; two vivid eyes, enchased
 In hollows filled with many a shade and streak
 Settling from the bold nose and bearded cheek,
 Nor might the half smile reach them that deformed
 A lip supremely perfect else.”

“ Men of action these!
 Who seeing just as little as you please
 Yet turn that little to account,—engage
 With, do not gaze at—carry on, a stage
 The work o’ the world, not merely make report
 The work existed ere this day”

After an apostrophe to Sordello and Dante the life of Sordello up to this his thirtieth year is here related—his sheltered dreaming life away in the Castle of Goito, one of the mountain strongholds of Ecelin Romano, head of the Ghibellines. Adelaide his wife in possession, for Romano

her husband has grown tired of the struggle for the Kaiser and retired to a convent, leaving his place for Taurello Salinguerra to fill.

The Castle of Goito is set among firs and pines and vines of Northern Italy : “Earth’s o’er-running beauty”; and art enriches every corner of the castle. Its main wonder, a marble font, is perpetuated :

“A dullish grey-streaked cumbrous font, a group
Upholds it; shrinking caryatides
Of just-tinged marble like Eve’s lilyed flesh
Beneath her Maker’s finger . . .
So dwell these noiseless girls, patient to see,
Like priestesses because of sin impure
Penanced for ever, who resigned endure,
Having that once drunk sweetness to the dregs;
And every eve, Sordello’s visit begs
Pardon for them: constant at eve he came
To sit beside each in her turn, the same
As one of them, a certain space.”

“And in this castle may be seen
A slender boy in a loose page’s dress,
Sordello: do but look on him awhile
Watching (’tis autumn) with an earnest smile
The noisy flock of thievish birds at work
Among the yellowing vineyards; see him lurk
(’Tis winter with its sullenest of storms)
Beside the arras-length of broidered forms
On tiptoe, lifting in both hands a light
Which makes yon warrior’s visage bright.

. . . His face
—Look, now he turns away! Yourselves shall trace
(The delicate nostril swerving wide and fine,
A sharp and restless lip, so well combine
With the calm brow) a soul fit to receive
Delight at every sense; you can believe
Sordello foremost in the regal class
Nature has broadly severed from her mass
Of men, and framed for pleasure, as she frames
Some happy lands, that have luxurious names,
For loose fertility; a footfall there
Suffices to upturn to the warm air
Half-germinating spices; mere decay
Produces richer life; and day by day

New pollen on the lily-petal grows,
And still more labyrinthine buds the rose.

. . . Fresh births of beauty make
Fresh homage ; every grade of love is past,
With every mode of loveliness ; then cast
Inferior idols off their borrowed crown
Before a coming glory. Up and down
Runs arrowy fire, while earthly forms combine
To throb the secret forth ; a touch divine—
And the scaled eyeball owns the mystic rod ;
Visibly through his garden walketh God.”

Sordello in his drowsy Paradise, peopling the solitude
with his fancies infantine :

“ As the adventurous spider making light
Of distance, shoots her threads from depth to height,
From barbican to battlement ; so flung
Fantasies forth and in their centre swung
Our architect.”

The beautiful stone girls, the painted warriors of the
picture gallery, are his audience, for he must contrive a
crowd, must have applause :

“ Who spied the mark
Of leprosy upon him violet-dark
Already as he loiters. . . . Calmly then
About this secret lodge of Adelaide’s
Glided his youth away.

Wherefore twist and torture thus,
Striving to name afresh the antique bliss,
Instead of saying, neither less nor more,
He had discovered, as our world before,
Apollo ?

Lean he grows and pale
Though restlessly at rest. Hardly avail
Fancies to soothe him ! The earnest smile is gone.
Then the monotony ends, a tournament is announced :—
For Trouveres bear the miracle about.
What a method to apprise
Neighbours of births, espousals, obsequies !

. . . Whence an accident
Which breaking on Sordello’s mixed content
Opened, like any flash that cures the blind,
The veritable business of mankind.”

At the tournament Adelaide and Palma preside :

"A showy man advanced. . . . 'Place
For the best Troubadour of Boniface,'
Halloed the Jongleurs,—'Eglamor, whose lay
Concludes his patron's Court of Love to-day.'
Obsequious Naldo strung the master's lute.

. . . He stealthily at watch the while,
Biting his lip to keep down a great smile
Of pride: then up he struck. Sordello's brain
Swam; for he knew a sometime deed again;
So could supply each foolish gap and chasm
The minstrel left in his enthusiasm,
Mistaking its true version—was the tale
Not of Apollo? Only what avail
Luring her down, that Elysan he pleased,
If the man dares no further? Has he ceased?
And, lo, the people's frank applause half done,
Sordello was beside him, had begun
(Spite of indignant twitchings from his friend
The Trouvere) the true lay with the true end,
Taking the other's names and time and place
For his. . . .

Back fell Naldo more aghast
Than some Egyptian from the harassed bull
That wheeled abrupt and, bellowing, fronted full
His plague, who spied a scarab 'neath the tongue,
And found 'twas Apis' flank his hasty prong
Insulted. But the people—but the cries,
The crowding round, and proffering a prize!
—For he had gained some prize.

. . . There sat Adelaide
Silent; but at her knees the very maid
Of the North Chamber, her red lips as rich,
The same pure fleecy hair; one weft of which,
Golden and great, quite touched his cheek as o'er
She leant, speaking some six words and no more.
He answered something, anything; and she
Unbound a scarf and laid it heavily
Upon him, her neck's warmth and all.

. . . How strange! a childhood spent
In taking, well, for him, so brave a bent."

"Sordello rose—to think, now; hitherto
He had but perceived. Sure a discovery grew
Out of it all! Best live from first to last
The transport o'er again! . . .

Strange, a man
 Recounted an adventure, but began
 Imperfectly ; his own task was to fill
 The frame-work up, sing well what he sung ill.
 . . . Had he ever turned, in fact,
 From Elys, to sing Elys ?—from each fit
 Of rapture to contrive a song of it ?
 True, this snatch or the other seemed to wind
 Into a treasure, helped himself to find
 A beauty in himself; for, see, he soared
 By means of that mere snatch, to many a hoard
 Of fancies ; as some falling cone bears soft
 The eye along the fir-tree spire, aloft
 To a dove's nest.”

Sordello ponders over this new discovery of his, of the value of poetry and the poet, their power to conduct to the heights the souls unable to reach them unaided :

“ Have they fancies—slow, perchance,
 Not at their beck, which indistinctly glance
 Until, by song, each floating part be linked
 To each, and all grow palpable, distinct ?”

He meets the bier of Eglamor, the defeat had killed him. Sordello muses on this, analyses the natures whom reverses destroy ; the poet who loves his song for show, for its applause, not for the song's sake, for the soul's own worship as the shrine

“ He knelt before, till, soothed by many a rite,
 The power responded, and some sound or sight
 Grew up, his own forever, to be fixed
 In rhyme, the beautiful, forever !—mixed
 With his own life, unloosed when he should please,
 Having it safe at hand, ready to ease
 All pain, remove all trouble ; every time
 He loosed that fancy from its bonds of rhyme,
 (Like Perseus when he loosed his naked love)
 Faltering ; so distinct and far above
 Himself, these fancies.”

But Eglamor's art was not this penetration to the holy of holies, his verse, but—

“Temple worship vague and vast”

—the poet of externals :

“He no genius rare,
 Transfiguring in fire or wave or air
 At will, but a poor gnome that, cloistered up
 In some rock-chamber with his agate-cup,
 His topaz rod, his seed-pearl, in these few
 And their arrangement finds enough to do
 For his best art. Then how he loved that art!
 The calling marking him a man apart
 From men—one not to care, take counsel for
 Cold hearts, comfortless faces—(Eglamor
 Was neediest of his tribe)—since verse, the gift,
 Was his, and men, the whole of them, must shift
 Without it, e'en content themselves with wealth
 And pomp and power, snatching a life by stealth.”

But by Eglamor, the name of a flower of a day,
 Sordello mounted to his own perennial flowering.

Sordello lived his fantastic Apollo life saturated with the
 beauty of nature :

“My own month came ;
 'Twas a sunrise of blossoming and May.
 Beneath a flowering laurel thicket lay
 Sordello ; each new sprinkle of white stars
 That smell fainter of wine than Massic jars
 Dug up at Baiæ, when the south wind shed
 The ripest, made him happier ; filleted
 And robed, the same, only a lute beside
 Lay on the grass.”

But the world intruded :

“Alas, they soon explained
 Away Sordello !”

They taunted him with his mean birth. Who was he
 to aspire to be “best poet”? He was but the child of
 a poor archer, Elcorte, saved from sack and burning in
 a raid of the times ; there, too,

“Young Ecelin was born
 Of Adelaide.”

But Sordello was a prey to his dream, and spite of his poor birth :

“ The seal was set: never again
 Sordello could in his own sight remain
 One of the many, one with hopes and cares
 And interests nowise distinct from theirs,
 Only peculiar in a thriveless store
 Of fancies, which were fancies and no more,
 Never again for him and for the crowd
 A common law was challenged and allowed
 If calmly reasoned of, howe'er denied
 By a mad impulse nothing justified
 Short of Apollo's presence.”

He would style himself God, and by the help of will,
 “ sums up this soliloquy,” display his power :

“ Song, not deeds,
 (For we get tired) was chosen. Fate would brook
 Mankind no other organ; he would look
 For not another channel to dispense
 His own volition by.”

But meanwhile why lose the joy of external life, the simple delight of mere existence ?

“ Slumber, Sordello! any day will serve.
 . . . Meanwhile eat these sun-dried grapes,
 And watch the soaring hawk escape! Life escapes
 Merrily thus.”

Naddo urges him to display his power, flatters, praises. Sordello, enervated by applause, sings for “ the song's effect,” and Naddo explains the deterioration :

“ The master certes meant to waste
 No effort, cautiously had probed the taste
 He'd please anon.”

. . . The first trial was enough :

“ He left imagining to try the stuff
 That held the imaged thing, and, let it writhe
 Never so fiercely, scarce allowed a tithe
 To reach the light—his language.”

How Sordello sought the cause of failure, re-wrought language, hammered out a new armour later :

“ Approved beyond the Roman panoply
Melted to make it,—boots not ; ”

but here—

“ Piece after piece that armour broke away,
Because perceptions whole, like that he sought
To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought
As language.”

Singing for the song’s effect brings failure :

“ And lo, Sordello vanished utterly,
Sundered in twain ; each spectral part at strife
With each ; one jarred against another life ;
The Poet thwarting hopelessly the Man—
 . . . Language the makeshift grew
Into a bravest of expedients, too ;
Apollo, seemed it now, perverse had thrown
Quiver and bow away, the lyre alone
Sufficed. While, out of dream, his day’s work went
To tune a crazy tenzoin or sirvente.”

The end was :

“ He retailed
Some ready-made opinion, put to use
This quip, that maxim, ventured reproduce
Gestures and tones—at any folly caught.”

His aim alone was not to sink under any rivals who plagiarised unblushingly and turned out such meaningless rubbish as :

“ As knops that stud some almug to the pith
Prickèd for gum, wry thence and crinkled worse
Than pursèd eyelids of a river horse
Sunning itself o’er the slime when whirrs the breeze.”

Gad-fly, says Browning in scorn of the plagiarist and second-hand poet, the borrower,

“ *Gad-fly*, that is. He might compete with these ! ”

But he says in illustration of his own work, how could he have painted nature if—

“ My hand too strong
 Twitch in the least the root-strings of the whole.
 How should externals satisfy my soul ? ”

He turns on the world whose approval he sought :

“ Their pleasure now his aim. Who were
 The Mantuans, after all, that he should care
 About their recognition, aye or no ?
 (Why blink the truth) was not he forced to help
 This same ungrateful audience, every whelp
 Of Naddo’s litter ?

‘ The knowledge that you are a bard
 Must constitute your prime, nay sole, reward ! ’
 So prattled Naddo, busiest of the tribe
 Of genius-haunters—how shall I describe
 What grubs or nips or rubs or pips—your louse
 For love, your flea for hate magnanimous
 Picking a sustenance from wear and tear
 By implements it sedulous employs
 To undertake, lay down, mete out, o’er-toise
 Sordello ? Fifty creepers to elude
 At once ! They settled staunchly ; shame ensued.
 ‘ Would you have your songs endure ? ’ ”

hazards Naddo the critic :

“ Build on the human heart ! why, to be sure
 Yours is one sort of heart—but I mean theirs,
 Ours, every one’s, the healthy heart one cares
 To build on ; ”

and perhaps it would be

“ Better think
 Their thoughts and speak their speech, secure to slink
 Back expeditiously to his safe place
 And chew the cud—what he and what his race
 Were really, each of them.”

But the poet, half disdaining compromise, strove with his weakness. The man portion not to be put off

“ With self-reflectings on the Poet’s scheme,”

The Poet hopelessly thwarting the man :

“ If dreams were tried,
His will swayed sicklily from side to side.”

Again the great man of Achive Salinguerra is holding his Love-Court :

“ ‘ Take a friend’s advice,’
Quoth Naddo to Sordello, ‘ nor be rash
Because your rivals (nothing can abash
Some folk) demur that we pronounced you best
To sound the great man’s welcome ; ’tis a test,
Remember.’ . . .

Another day, Sordello finds, will bring
The soldier, and he cannot choose but sing ;
So a last shift, quits Mantua—slow, alone.
Out of that aching brain, a very stone,
Song must be struck. . . . Poetry annoys
Its utmost: wherefore fret ? Verses may come
Or keep away ! And thus he wandered, dumb
Till evening.”

Suddenly he comes upon his boyhood’s haunts by another “ defile he never dared explore ” :

“ Back rushed the dream, unwrapped
Him wholly. ’Twas Apollo now they lapped,
Those mountains, not a pettish minstrel meant
To wear his soul away in discontent,
Brooding on fortune’s malice. Heart and brain
Swelled; he expanded to himself again.”

“ That night, torch in hand, he must explore
The maple chamber. . . .

Last, he lay
Beside the Carian group reserved and still.”

What had been wrong with him? he ponders. The Body had failed to reflect Will :

“ Was the Will Itself
In fault ? ”

He probes his mind to know why he had failed :

“ His forehead pressed the moonlit shelf
Beside the youngest marble maid awhile ;

Then raising it, he thought, with a long smile,
 ‘I shall be king again!’ as he withdrew
 The envied scarf; into the font he threw
 His crown.

Next day, no poet! ‘Wherefore?’ asked Taurello. . . .

The master of the pageant looked perplexed
 Till Naddo’s whisper came to his relief:
 ‘His highness knew what poets were: in brief,
 Had not the tetchy race prescriptive right
 To peevishness, caprice? or, call it spite,
 One must receive their nature in its length
 And breadth, expect the weakness with their strength!’
 —So phrasing, till his stock of phrases spent,
 The easy-natured soldier smiled assent,
 Settled his portly person, smoothed his chin,
 And nodded that the bull-bait might begin.”

Into the font Sordello threw his old laurels:

“ Goito gets once more
 Sordello to itself! A dream is o’er,
 And the suspended life begins anew:
 . . . so the stain
 O’ the world forsakes Sordello, with its pain,
 Its pleasure; the last face glances,
 The last voice murmurs, ‘twixt the blossomed vines.”

He reflects on the problem of mind:

“ Of men, of that machine supplied by thought
 To compass self-perception with.”

The machine of mind drives the thoughts to attempt to explain their workings; he needs must satisfy the curiosities the new experience has aroused:

“ Slide here,” says Browning:
 “ Over a sweet and solitary year
 Wasted; or simply notice change in him—
 How eyes, once with exploring bright, grew dim
 And satiate with receiving. . . .

He slept, but was aware he slept,
 So frustrated . . . yet still distinguished plain
 His own blood’s measured clicking at his brain.”

Here he learned his limitations, read the one-ness of man with nature, its irrevocable laws ; debated the meaning of himself, his work ; condemned its past fruits, blamed his early strivings, yet is disinclined to strive again with his new material, seeking the clue to the mystery of soul and mind and the human will, the impotency of thought to cope with the expression of a fettered will :

“ Able to exchange
 My ignorance (I felt) for knowledge, and
 Idle because I could thus understand—
 Could e'en have penetrated to its core
 Our mortal mystery, yet—fool—forbore,
 Preferred elaborating in the dark
 My casual stuff, by any wretched spark
 Burn of my predecessors, though one stroke
 Of mine had brought the flame forth !”

Indecision paralyses his will to express himself, but urges it again, for is not the light fleeting meanwhile, time is passing :

“ 'Tis noontide : wreak ere night
 Somehow my will upon it, rather ! Slake
 This thirst somehow, the poorest impress take
 That serves ! A blasted bud displays you, torn,
 Faint rudiments of the flower unborn.”

The history of Sordello turns back upon itself, we watch the processes of imagination striving to embody beauty, see the egoistic absorption of a soul wasting in introspective dreaming, weaving its dreams fruitlessly, till an encounter at the Love Court with another singer, also singing the song of Apollo :

“ Opened, like any flash that cures the blind
 The veritable business of mankind.”

We are shown a delicious mood of fantastic dreaming, entrancing introspection, sweet self-worshipping ; we see a loss of his newly found powers, are witness of his despair at the fear that Apollo has vanished, and that he is but

a plagiarist of his former self, when suddenly by another “accident” a tremendous appeal to his old boyish Apollo memories, the pettish minstrel disappears, and—

“ Apollo’s dream again laps him wholly :
He expanded to himself again.”

Here, when he would forget the world and the quarrel of his country around him, when he would have dreamed on, Palma sends for him, to take his place in the difficulties the country is in.

Here is the crowd rocking in lust of war and hate of its enemies ; for it the sunset glory above spreads in vain, the stillness of the autumn eve is unheeded. Faces are livid with wrath ; the contagion of the crowd ; ripe hate, like wine inflaming fear, is in each breast ; old men with shut eyelids before the fact of war

“ Rocking to and fro :
Letting the silent luxury trickle slow
About the hollows where a heart should be ;
But the young gulped with a delirious glee
Some foretaste of their first debauch of blood
At the fierce news.”

Under the gorgeous sunset but

“ A single eye
From all Verona cared for the soft sky.”

Sordello has been called to Verona to take his place in the world of warfare. He lies in the Palace, whose windows overlook the clamour and din of preparation for war. Palma had demanded his presence at Verona. She has unfolded her plan : she loves Sordello, will throw Richard over, she and Sordello will join the Ghibellines, and a great future will be theirs. Palma has related the growth of her love for him ; she has noted his qualities—he is the man the country needs. He lies pondering the question, Guelf or Ghibelline ? The principles underlying the struggle are dissected :

" Or say two principles that live
 Each fitly by its representative.
 Hill-cat—who called him so? the gracefulest
 Adventurer, the ambiguous stranger guest
 Of Lombardy (suck but that ruffling fur,
 Those talons to their sheath!) whose velvet purr
 Soothes jealous neighbours."

After long pondering Sordello decides that Palma's offer must be rejected. His sympathies are with the Guelfs; he decides to be :

" Gate-vein of this heart's blood of Lombardy."

Here all dramatic disguise vanishes, and the call, as he conceived it to have come to himself, is reflected upon, thus finishing in Venice a dream raised in far-off England —his dream of service to Humanity, poor Humanity for whom he there demanded material amelioration, asking, too, that the whole race—

" Might add the spirit to the body's grace
 And all be dizened out as chiefs and bards,"

like the fortunate few.

But humanity mistrusts him, he says, and looks doubt of him out of :

" Lashless eyes, inveterately tear-shot."

Here, at the end of the third book, Browning drops the cloak of the medieval Sordello, and transfers the story to that of his own problems, his own romance, his own hopes and moods, disappointments and faiths. In his own person he talks it out with his English correspondent, Miss Euphrasia Haworth, at the end of the third book.

The aims and method of his work are here disclosed, art which was to be both concealment and revealment, truth to be given in rhymes, that :

" Disport, disperse, lingering overhead
 Like an escape of angels: Rather say
 My transcendental platan! mounting gay.

. . . I offer unveil the last of mysteries
 Man's inmost life shall have yet freer play:
 Once more I cast external things away
 And natures composite, so decompose
 That . . . why he writes Sordello.”

From his digression to his English Eyebright he goes back to showing how—

“ Men flounder on without a term,
 Each a god's germ, doomed to remain a germ
 In unexpanded infancy unless . . .
 But that's the story . . . dull enough, confess.”

“ I offer to serve the crowd—to give life up in service
 to . . . only grant
 That I do serve,” says Sordello here.

To lift by his poetry the people's “ dim vulgar vast unobvious grief ” by “ dim vulgar vast unobvious work ” was to be his method of service to his time and race. He concluded with the amusing story of John the Beloved so caricatured in a painting by one of his disciples that he appeared the devil domiciled, his pastoral cross blurred to the devil's twy-prong. As the master saw his picture he started back aghast :

“ . . . Am I to thy roof beguiled
 To see the—the—the Devil domiciled ?
 Whereto sobbed Xanthus, ‘ Father, ’tis yourself
 Installed, a limning which our utmost pelf
 Went to procure against to-morrow's loss :
 And that's no twy-prong, but a pastoral cross
 You're painted with.’ ”

Here in Venice he confesses his dream for the people is less than it was in England :

“ I ask youth and strength
 And health for each of you, not more—at length
 Grown wise, who asked at home that the whole race
 Might add the spirit's to the body's grace,
 And all be dizened out as chiefs and ‘ bards.’ ”

The dream of humanity's service is confessed, but humanity mistrusts him :

“ You, no doubt,
Have the true knack of tiring suitors out
With those thin lips on tremble, lashless eyes
Inveterately tear-shot : . . . and hear
Further before you say it is to sneer
I call you ravishing.

Warped souls and bodies ! Yet God spoke
Of right-hand, foot and eye, selects our yoke,
Sordello, as your poetship may find !
So, sleep upon my shoulder, child, nor mind
Their foolish talk ; we'll manage re-instate
Your old worth.”

That dream that arose in England Italy confirmed :

“ What if
Thy race shall be thy mistress, and into one face
The many faces crowd. . . .
While awkwardly enough your Moses smites
The rock, though he forgo his Promised Land,
Thereby have Satan claim his carcass, and
Figure as a Metaphysic poet . . . ah !
Mark ye the dim first oozings ? Meribah !”

Sacrifice the “ now ” for the “ for ever,” perhaps, but his decision is called for at this time of his country’s struggle—and his natural bent is poetry ; he is poet, artist, for whom, says Sordello, there is but one compelling, overpowering need :

“ To blend with each external charm
Bury themselves, the whole heart wide and warm
In something not themselves : they would belong
To what they worship : stronger and more strong.”

In Book IV. the poet goes back to the history of medieval times again, goes back to his task of picturing men :

“ Each a God’s germ, doomed to remain a germ
Unless . . . but that’s the story.”

In a slough of misery Sordello makes his way to the gate of the great Salinguerra ; he passes on from the sickening sights and sounds of a city under conditions of siege, from the spectacle of a degraded humanity finding its jests there in sickening obscene merriment : from these squalid sights and heart-breaking scenes of war, he passes up from the gates of the Palace through avenues and gardens, fountains and trees, shrubs and glistening statuary, terrace upon terrace ; apotheosis of material success :

“ Till the grim San Pietro Palace appears.”

He contrasts himself with the great man of action : he, Sordello the dreamer, the idealist—a slight, unknown, obscure youth passing to interview, on behalf of Pope and the people, the great fighting man of the Kaiser, this man of action, magnificent in physique, assured in manner, easy of speech, master of life. As he sees all the evidences of success, he muses with misgiving that perhaps men of action are rightly first in the world’s opinion and favour. He agrees that the man of action deserves the immediate reward he gets for his work.

He is crushed under the interview by the scorn of the great man of action, he, Sordello, passes out from the great palace crushed by the sense of his own insignificance amid these evidences of success and power of the man of action.

The interview over, broken by the bearing and arguments of the scornful “ man of action,” Sordello “ staggered off from the palace older by years than at his entry ; staggered off, blind, mute, and deaf like some fresh-mutilated brute.”

The suffering of Italy under the war is related. He

is in Ferrara, which is under siege ; he sees the struggle between Guelf and Ghibelline : there does not seem much to choose between them—each is selfish. There must be laws underlying this struggle between men —perhaps there is a cause above Guelf and Ghibelline which he could serve. He sees the sickening scenes. Someone asks him to give them a song : he gives them the old song of Crescentius, who had had a great dream of building up a city of perfection where new order and justice should reign. But it is too great a task for one man to attempt—he is bitterly cast down, dejected at his sense of impotency under the call to rebuild and reconstruct the poor present into the shining city of his dreams, but it is his in imagination.

In Books IV. and V. of the poem, the picture of a city under siege is given : the horror of squalid humanity under the extremities of hunger and bloodshed, of despair and alternate feverish merriment, callous degraded beings without much knowledge of what the contest means.

It is here, as wandering in deepest dejection and misery, dreaming his dream of being able to help by his song the suffering obscure people, pledging himself to its service by his obscure work—here in his depression he hears the “ Voice ” which tells him where his mistake lies :

“ A low voice which wound into my heart.”

The voice relates to him his past, shows him the reason of his failure, unfolds the cause of his impotent efforts : it bids him wake from his error, to cease to count the first step and the last as one ; shows him his mistake of expecting to vault to the last step without patient climbing from the first. It showed the slow steps of progress, the wide gap between vision and performance :

“ Be man now, it urged : Let those glances fall
The basis, the beginning step of all,
Which proves you just a man—is that gone too ?”

The Voice related the black writing of evolution, progress from great workman to great workman; it relates the failure between :

“ For one thrust forward fifty such fall back.”

It urged the lesson of faithful work :

“ If one step’s awry, one bulge
 Calls for correction by a step we thought
 Got over long since, why till that is wrought
 No progress . . . ‘twere o’er-leaping work
 Some one must do before, howe’er it irk.”

Unsparingly the Voice discloses his mistake, tells him that each workman is but a scaffold, to become in its turn, its service done, a thing to spurn. Relentlessly it probed his weakness, this vaulting ambition; bade him do, not dream; recounted the miseries of the people, poor humanity; showed him his immediate duty—his first duty, the thing he could do :

“ Since talking is your trade,
 There’s Salinguerra left you to persuade.
 ‘Let others seek,’ it whispered softly:
 Thy care is found, thy life’s provision, if thy race
 Should be thy mistress, and, into one face
 The many faces crowd.”

“ Who means to help must still support the load
 Hildebrand lifted —why hast Thou, he groaned,
 Imposed on me a burthen Paul had moaned
 And Moses dropped beneath? Much done and yet
 Doubtless that grandest task God ever set
 On man, left much to do.”

When the Voice ceased Sordello arose and passed calm to interview Salinguerra again, to reaffirm his conviction that the Guelf cause was right. He renewed his pleading under the great man’s undisguised contempt, his open disinclination to listen, his amused tolerance : at last

his expression of ridicule of Sordello's claim for poetry, and the poet, for its mission to help the happiness of Humanity.

But Sordello's pleading is absolute nonsense to the great man of action : "The Chief immeasurably yawned," so spurring Sordello on, for he was one :

" Whom vanity nigh slew contempt shall save.
Sordello muttered and renewed
His proposition for the multitude."

The great man answers with banter, then with scorn, ridicules Sordello's high claim for the poet as being "earth's essential king"; asks him with indignation if he thinks that the poet's knack or gift—

" Or whatso'er it be of verse, might lift
The globe, a lever like the hand and head
Of—Man of Action, as the Jongleur said,
The Great Men in the people's dialect.
And not a moment did this scorn affect
Sordello."

Again he pressed his claim for the Guelfs, the people, the Spiritual, the Patriotic, as against the Ghibellines, the Kaiser's mercenary Huns, the then conquering power pouring into Italy. He pleads for the Guelf cause, but Salinguerra would draw him to the Ghibellines; he has patronage to bestow, can make Sordello Prefect of Northern Italy, could give him Palma for bride—the girl of his dreams of love.

Sordello is confronted with a fiery temptation, the Guelfs and the unsuccessful people, the losing side but the side he has vowed to help, that he has confronted Salinguerra to plead for : he has to decide between the convictions of his soul, poverty and an obscure struggle for the people, or personal aggrandisement, present prosperity, high place in the Kaiser's pay, and the possession of Palma for his bride—and gain to the Guelfs by his adherence seems doubtful; the Ghibellines' side would

give him immediate success, he will take triumph now instead of the visionary for ever of the Guelfs.

The Chief replies with arguments of persuasion, and promises him the love of Palma, and the “bauble’s cumbrous garniture,” the badge of the Kaiser :

“ I have not been so flattered many a day
 As by your pale friend—Bacchus ! The least help
 Would like the hind’s fawn to a lion’s whelp
 I could . . . why look ye ! ”

And the badge was thrown
 Across Sordello’s neck.”

He looks at Sordello with new light reflecting—

“ That this minstrel was Romano’s last
 Servant—himself the first ! Could he contrast
 The whole ! that minstrel’s thirty years just spent
 In doing naught, their noblest event
 This morning’s journey hither, as I’m told
 Who yet was lean, outworn and really old,
 A stammering awkward man that scarce dared raise
 His eye before the magisterial gaze.”

Undeterred by the fighting man’s silence, Sordello urges his plea :

“ He feels he could die, even die, for his belief.”

A flash of bitter truth seizes Sordello. He has wasted his life in dreams.

“ Rather tear men out the heart
 And the truth ! Sordello muttered and renewed
 His propositions for the multitude.”

The contemptuous Salinguerra stopped to trifle, pretended to agree, made sport of the Guelf claims, till Sordello again outpours :

“ And round these three the people formed a ring,
 What Sordello’s life outpoured ‘ Was for that age a
 novel thing ? ”

He was fresh-sinewed every joint,
 Each bone new marrowed as whom gods anoint
 Though mortal to their rescue.' ' Since this strife
 is right for once.' ' The People my support.'
 ' My poor Sordello! What may we extort
 By this, I wonder?' Palma's lighted eyes
 Turned to Taurello who, long past surprise,
 Began, ' You love him—what you'd say at large
 Let me say briefly.' . . .

Understand,
 This while Sordello was becoming flushed
 Out of his whiteness, thoughts rushed, fancies rushed;
 He pressed his hand upon his head and signed
 Both should forbear him."

Palma's triumph bursts out :

" The truth is, thus we scatter, ay, like chaff these
 Guelfs."

The great Chief sat silent, reviewing the situation, the losses and successes of the Ghibellines. He had been debating on whose shoulders to place the Kaiser's badge he wound and unwound carelessly, contemptuously recalling the interview with Palma's choice, this young Sordello she loved.

And then :

" Ensued a strange and solemn visition . . .
 Up in the midst a truth grew, without speech
 And when the giddiness sank and the haze
 Subsided, they were sitting, no amaze,
 Sordello with the baldric on, his sire
 Silent, though his proportions seemed aspire
 Momently; and interpreting the thrill—
 Night at its ebb,—Palma was found there still
 Relating somewhat Adelaide confessed
 A year ago, while dying on her breast.
 ' Embrace him, madman!' Palma cried,
 Who through the laugh saw sweat drops burst apace,
 And his lips blanching: he did not embrace
 Sordello, but he laid Sordello's hand
 On his own eyes, mouth, forehead."

The great man put his case, Sordello goes to ponder it and decide his course.

The analysis of Sordello's conflicting thought is followed, he has to review the situation under this new truth, and all the other truths he cherished that led to absolute truth :

“ The main discovery and prime concern
 All that just now importeth him to learn
 Truth's self ? Which of these could he suspect,
 Prying into them by the sudden blaze ? ”

We follow to its recesses this analysis of a mind which had ever brought it to failure so far ; he probes the truth of the situation which suddenly lifted the veil for Sordello :

“ The real way seemed made up of all the ways—
 Mood after mood of the one mind in him ;
 Tokens of the existence, bright or dim,
 Of a transcendent all-embracing sense
 Demanding only outward influence,
 A soul, in Palma's phrase, above his soul,
 Power to uplift his power, such moon's control,
 Over such sea-depths—and their mass had swept
 Onward from the beginning and still kept
 Its course : but years and years the sky above
 Held none, and so, untasked of any love
 His sensitiveness idles ? ”

. . . But why doubt

Some love meet for such strength, some moon without
 Would match his sea ? or fear, Good manifest
 Only the Best breaks faith. Ah but the Best
 Somehow eludes us ever, still might be
 And is not ! ”

Down sank the People's Then ; uprose their Now.
 These sad ones render service to ! And how
 Piteously little must that service prove
 —Had surely proved in any case ! for move
 Each obstacle away, let youth
 Become awake it had surprised a truth
 'Twere service to impart—can truth be seized,
 Settled forthwith, and, of the captive eased,
 Its captor find fresh prey, since this alit
 So happily, no gesture luring it,
 The earnest of a flock to follow ? Vain,
 Most vain ! a life to spend ere this he chain
 To the poor crowd's complacence.”

He remembered—

“ how certain bards were thralled
—Buds blasted, but if breath more like perfume
Than Naddo’s staring nosegays, carrion bloom.”

Must he be

“ Content the while with some mean spark by dint
Of some chance blow, the solitary hint
Of buried fire, which, rip earth’s breast, would stream
Skyward! Sordello’s miserable gleam
Was looked for at the moment—he would dash
This badge, and all it brought, to earth—abash
Taurello thus, perhaps persuade him wrest
The Kaiser from his purpose—would attest
His own belief, in any case. Before
He dashes it, however, think once more!
For were that little truly service ?”

So the debate goes on :

“ No dispute
’Twere fitliest maintain the Guelfs in rule:
That makes your life’s work. . . .
What the prophet saith
The poet vainly sings.”

In the long soliloquy of Sordello the mystery of his limitations is dissected; all that the will can do he has done. Was the will itself at fault? he asks. Why is he unfruitful in his desire? Had he not willed aright?

“ So seemed Sordello’s closing—truth evolved
By his flesh-half’s break-up; the sudden swell
Of his expanding soul showed Ill and Well,
Sorrow and Joy, Beauty and Ugliness,
Virtue and Vice, the Larger and the Less,
All qualities, in fine, recorded here,
Might be but modes of time and this one sphere
Urgent on these, but not of force to bind
Eternity, as Time—as Matter—Mind,
If Mind, Eternity should choose assert
Their attributes within a Life: thus girt
With circumstance, next change beholds them cinct
Quite otherwise.

As suddenly he felt himself alone
Quite out of Time and this world: all was known.
What made the secret of his past despair?
Most imminent when he seemed most aware
Of his own self-sufficiency: made mad
By craving to expand the power he had
And not new power to be expanded?
Fit to the finite his infinity
And thus proceed for ever, in degree
Changed but in kind the same, still limited
To the appointed circumstance and dead
To all beyond.”

He reasons on life's conditions, the body's limited life, the soul tied to the body, the soul permanent, the body not—with conditions not understood. The result is, the body soon “sinks under what was meant a wondrous boon, leaving its bright accomplice all aghast.”

There must be some truth that would give him solution of the problem, says the baffled muser. Sordello's past is probed for its meaning. Why did life seem made up of crossing ways? Why his sense of incompleteness demanding completion? Why the eager desire to serve, demanding something to serve? Why this power within longing for power without to control its sea, as the moon draws the tides? What if there were a cause to champion? Sorrow fell upon him in the ambitious beginning. Why?

Sordello had altruistic intent, but we find Browning saying that Sordello had not attained the summit, and in his own voice he tells him what was wrong and what is wrong with all minds of the Sordello type until they attain the highest achievement of soul development, the looking upwards and outwards, the lifting of the emphasis off the intellect, the leverage on the soul to complete the work after the mind has built up the machinery which compasses mental perception of truths, but is inadequate for compassing the completed round of absolute truth.

In long monologue Browning shows Sordello attempting to arrive at this compassing of knowledge which will

relieve him of the torture of half-truths, half-comprehension, half-realisations, some power other than he knows, but divines, ready to uplift and round off and make veritable truth, satisfy truth entire, instead of the half-comprehensions, the half-achievements he has so far been capable of. In his long monologue he struggles to wring out truth that will lift him to success—the truth of a new influence, satisfying, drawing, and vital.

As Sordello strives for light upon this problem, as he struggles for conclusion, Browning in his own voice tells him what was the matter with him, why he struggled with circumstance, why his work was futile to accomplish, so far, his soul's designs :

“ Ah, my Sordello, I this once befriend
And speak for you. Of a Power above you still
Which, utterly incomprehensible,
Is out of rivalry, which thus you can
Love, tho' unloving all conceived by man—
What need! And of—none the minutest duct
To that out nature, naught that would instruct
And so let rivalry begin to live—
But of a Power its representative
Who, being for authority the same,
Communication different, should claim
A course, the first chose but this last revealed—
This Human clear, as that Divine concealed—”

“ This Human clear, as that Divine concealed ”—
“ what old-fashioned religion calls God in Christ ” is the interpretation of the lines by Professor Dowden of this declaration of Browning as the need of Sordello.

As Palma and Salinguerra await Sordello's decision, they talk together in praise of his poetry, praise of his face from her lips. Palma, who contrasts him with Richard, the now rejected by her for love of Sordello, the father sucking in each phrase “ as if an angel spoke.” She recites Sordello's poems, the old man draws her in delight on his mailed knee, sees her his daughter. He paces up and down again with rapid speech. Then a

sound from the room above—Sordello’s signal that his decision was made :

“ Out they two reeled dizzily. . . . ”

They find Sordello dead, the badge of the Kaiser under his foot :

“ Still

Palma said a triumph lingering in the wide eyes
Wider than some spent swimmer: if he spies
Help from above in his extreme despair
And, head far back on shoulder thrust, turns there.”

For the remainder of the story of the Guelf and Ghibelline struggle after Sordello’s death, see the Chronicles of Mantua, says the poem—how they never ceased praising Sordello, who—

“ Passed with posterity, to all intents
For just the god he never could become
As Knight, Bard, Gallant, men were never dumb
In praise of him: while what he should have been
Could be, and was not, the one step too mean
For him to take—we suffer for this day.”

If Sordello had stepped out and led the people, the Guelf cause would have been won instead of waiting for later times which delayed

“ Its chance ere Dante could arrive and take
That step Sordello spurned
. . . had he embraced
Their cause then men had plucked Hesperian fruit.”

The end of Taurello and the Ghibellines was defeat. Friedrich himself came to Lombardy, but the Guelf cause won, and the end of Taurello was to be made a prisoner and mock by the conqueror :

“ He dwindled down
To a mere showy turbulent soldier, grown . . .
Subtle. How else . . .
in fine Venice’s marine
Was meddled with; no overlooking that!
She captured him in his Ferrara, fat

And florid at a banquet, more by fraud
Than force, to speak the truth, there's slender laud
Ascribed you for assisting eighty years
To pull his death on such a man. . . .
Carry him to Venice for a show—Citizens
Gathered importunately, fives and tens
To point their children the Magnifico,
All but a monarch once."

The poem of "Sordello" ends with a questioning by Browning of what might have happened if Sordello, the medieval singer, had lived to lead the people. He speculates upon what Sordello could have been—should have been, perhaps, at that crisis of his country's troubles; what would have been the result if he could have taken the one step he did not take, for which we suffer to this day; all that might have happened if Sordello had chosen to lead the people.

But he thinks he lived in this better thing, his song that has been heard after the lapse of six hundred years, which reached his ears from the lips of a little child of Asolo :

" A child barefoot and rosy . . .
On a heathy brown and nameless hill
By sparkling Asolo. . . .
Up and up goes he, singing all the while
Some unintelligible words to beat
The lark, God's poet, swooning at his feet,
Soworsted is he at the few fine locks
' Stained like pale honey oosed from topmost rocks
Sunblanched the livelong Summer '—all that's left
Of the Goito lay!"

CHAPTER VII

"SORDELLO" (Continued)

The mystical moment—Vision and Voice—Humanity as Mistress—Call of the people—Poet as Maker-see—Difficulty of subject—Expects understanding from a few—Disappointment—Dedication to Milsand.

In the long poem of "Sordello" is reflected those magical moments which, "be they what they may," says Wordsworth, are yet the master light of all our seeing—those openings out of consciousness, saltations of soul, the number and nature of which, says Emerson, mark the difference between the highest and lowest of mankind. Moments, he declares, which are for ever memorable, can change man's market-cart into a chariot of the sun, make him very careful not to cheat his neighbour, draw him from the circumference to the centre of the circle.

"Moments," says Carlyle, "God-announcing. What are the laws of Nature?" he asks. "Do we know even the alphabet of the book of God? To the minnow in its little creek, the inundations of the tides is a dislocation of its laws, to its minnow soul a miracle!"

"Moments," says Tennyson, when the soul seems to come on that which

"Is,
And catch the deep foundations of the world."

When freezing reason questioned Tennyson's intuitions: "Like a man in wrath, the heart stood up and answered, 'I have felt.' "

"One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil or of good,
Than all the sages can,"

asserts Wordsworth.

" Suddenly thy shadow fell on me," says Shelley:
 " I shrieked and clasped my hands in ecstasy."

" Can this strange power I know be Shakespeare?" writes Keats to his friend Hayden, in awe of the imagination which brought his felicities of thought and language to him.

" God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear.
 Let others reason and welcome, 'tis we musicians
 know,"

says Browning.

There are two knowledges in man, says Bacon : " As the waters, some descending from above, some ascending from beneath, the one informed by the light of Nature, the other inspired by Divine revelation."

" The sounds of music soft stillness in the night," says
 Shakespeare,
 " Become the touches of sweet harmony.
 There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest
 But in his motion like an angel sings,
 Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubims.
 Such harmony is in immortal souls,
 But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
 Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it."

There is a vision, says Plato, which is the most marvellous of life—beauty in its very essence—for whoever has been rightly instructed by love. A vision for the sake of which all former labours and pains were unknowingly taken. From this supreme beauty the soul finally learns to know what the very essence of beauty is. There is a voice sometimes heard by the soul which carries conviction of truth and has the force of a revelation : intuition which bears no relation to reason, is no sequence to intellectual premises—intuition from beginning to end, stamped with the same message.

These moments, say the poets, bear no relation to reason, are pure intuitions, are no sequence to intellectual

premises, are all stamped with the same invariable reaction—the irresistible desire to share the joy of them with others, to pass on the Voice and the Vision :

“ O Eternal beam,” prays Dante, “ give my tongue
Power but to leave one sparkle of thy glory
Unto the race to come.”

“ Here kneeleth one,” says Dante,
“ Who of all spirits hath reviewed the state
From the world’s lowest gap unto this height

.

As one, who from a dream awakened straight
All he hath seen forgets, yet still retains
Impression of the feeling in his dream.
E’en such am I, and yet the sense of sweet
That sprang from it, still trickles in my heart:
Thus in the sun-thaw is the snow revealed,
Thus in the winds on flitting leaves was lost.”

The poem of “ Sordello ” contains an apostrophe to Dante : “ I have all Dante in my head and heart,” wrote Browning to Miss Barrett ; but how or when Dante superseded Shelley in his regard, he never confided to the world.

In a letter to Miss Barrett, Browning gives the inception of his poem of “ Sordello.” “ Dante’s Sordello,” he wrote, “ was his own Sordello’s case,” and he quotes the lines from Dante describing the mystical moment when souls released from Purgatory rose of their own impulse as penance ended, and Heaven was won : “ And sinners were we to the extreme hour ” :

“ Then light from Heaven fell, making us aware
So that repenting us and pardoned, out
Of life we passed to God, at peace with Him
Who fills the heart with yearning Him to see.”

“ Elevated above itself and rapt in ecstasy, it beholds things in the Divine Light ” (“ Paradise,” xxx. 100).

The poem of “ Sordello ” was Browning’s manifesto of

his soul, and his choice of poetry as medium of his "seeing" and the purpose which he intended to put that seeing to :

"Who will may hear Sordello's story told," he begins ;
"Who would has heard Sordello's story told," he ends.

In the poem of "Sordello" attempt is made to picture those transcendental moments, those magical moments, dynamic moments of life when vital forces seem suddenly to be released, accumulated energy discharged, new knowledge grasped, new conceptions seized, old intuitions irresistibly confirmed. Will-o'-the-wisp lights of consciousness seem suddenly to be lifted over the threshold into the steady light of incontrovertible knowledge.

Sordello is primarily concerned with this overarching mystery of emotion. It was into the very brain of man himself Browning pressed for explanation of the mystery he attempted to picture. The dramatic background of strife between the temporal and spiritual powers for supremacy was only the background a picture requires. Says the Preface : "My stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul."

It is to be a difficult undertaking, and perhaps unsuccessful :

"When at some future no-time a brave band
Sees using what it sees, then shake my hand
In heaven, my brother."

The highest class of poet is the Maker-see, he will attempt to be this, to make others see, to gaze into heaven and direct the gaze heavenward.

Browning claims our sympathy in this attempt of his to present so elusive a thing as the romance of a soul : thought is a frail thing to handle ; language a stiff medium in which to enshrine it ; and—

"Perceptions whole like that he sought
To clothe, reject so pure a work as thought";

but

“ Thought is the soul of act, and must be fixed
In rhyme the beautiful for ever.”

He does not expect an audience of living beings, so ranges the dead to hear Sordello’s story unfold, for :

“ ‘Tis not for fate to choose
Silence or song because she can refuse
Real eyes to glisten more, real hearts to ache
Less oft, real brows turn smoother for our sake.”

Never would he have chosen such an expedient for the telling of a story he could body forth so well, says the poet, in the opening lines of “Sordello” . . . but it seems—

“ Your setters-forth of unexampled themes,
Makers of quite new men, producing them
Would best chalk broadly on each vesture’s hem
The wearer’s quality.”

It is a Quixotic adventure, he asserts :

“ I marshal you Life’s elemental masque,
Show men, on evil or on good lay stress,
This light, this shade, make prominent, suppress
All ordinary hues that softening blend
Such natures with the level. . . .

Light thwarted breaks

A limpid purity to rainbow flakes.”

The evolution of Sordello from boyish egotism to manly altruism is slow and painful. Sordello learns the song of Apollo in his boyhood, loses it in youth, regains it, responds to it in manhood, juggles with its song, gains applause; is impelled to ponder and dissect it, to soliloquise and probe, analyse and compare, classify and correlate experience to know its meaning, to come to an understanding of the laws he suspected at work under the phenomena he relates. To blend the Ideal into workable

stuff of life is the problem of Sordello. He believes he knows life's secret—a “secret 'twere service to impart.” The poem of “Sordello” is an attempt to pass that secret on to the world : in it is further revealed the manner in which he proposes to graft this truth upon the consciousness of mankind, and his life's attitude as one of protest is symbolised. Though passionately secretive, the poet laid bare the progress of his soul ; the sensitiveness to Beauty, its necessity to create, its imagination plying fruitlessly till contest and strain—

“Opened, like any flash that cures the blind,
The veritable business of mankind.”

The dramatic moment of emotion, the sudden opening up of a new point of view, is the recurrent note of “Sordello,” with the call to new service arising from it.

In a review of “Sordello” in his book “A New Spirit of the Age,” Mr. Horne, who was the friend of both Browning and Miss Barrett, wrote : “To some ‘Sordello’ will appear to be a work addressed to the perceptions of a seventh sense, or of a class of faculties which we do not at present know we possess—if we really do possess. . . . It abounds in things addressed to a second sight—the poet may be considered the Columbus of a possible discovery. The daily or weekly critic, who writes against time, should have been glad to dismiss ‘Sordello’ with an angry paragraph,” says Mr. R. H. Horne in this book, “A New Spirit of the Age,” which contains an article on Browning.

The poem of “Sordello” remained undedicated for twenty-five years, till it found an appreciator in Joseph Milsand, a French littérateur, whose article on Browning in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* made them acquainted ; and in the publication of his collected works, Browning dedicated “Sordello” to this critic, the first real appreciator of his purposes in Art. So true was his insight into his mind and Art, disclosed by the article, that Browning took him straightway into his mind and affec-

tion, and henceforward he was his confidant and friend, and his literary adviser.

Milsand was a distinguished scholar and critic, had made a reputation as a philosopher, and wrote on “*La Poésie Anglaise*” in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, and had published a book on Milton. Of Browning, Milsand wrote that he suggested a power even greater than his achievement. “He speaks like a spirit who is able to do that which to past centuries has been almost impossible.”

In 1863 the long delayed dedication of “*Sordello*” was made :

“To J. MILSAND, of Dijon.

“DEAR FRIEND,—Let the next poem be introduced by your name, therefore remembered along with one of the deepest of my affections, and so repay all trouble it ever cost me. I wrote it twenty-five years ago for only a few, counting even in those on somewhat more care about its subject than they really had. My own faults of expression were many; but with care for a man or book such would be surmounted, and without it what avails the faultlessness of either? I blame nobody, least of all myself, who did my best then and since; for I lately gave time and pains to turn my work into what the many might, instead of what the few must,—like; but after all, I imagined another thing at first, and therefore leave as I find it.

“The historical decoration was purposely of no more importance than a background requires; my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul; little else is worth study. I at least always thought so,—you, with many known and unknown to me, think so—others may one day think so; and whether my attempt remain for them or not, I trust, though away and past it, to continue ever yours.

“R. B.”

In a letter to his friend Alfred Domett, Browning gave explanation of “*Sordello*” :

“From the beginning I have been used to take a high ground, and say all endeavour elsewhere is thrown away. Endeavour to *think* (the real *thought*), to *imagine*, to *create* or whatever they call it—as well endeavour to add the cubit to your stature! Nascitur poeta—Here is the reason why I have gone on so far although succeeding so indifferently. I felt so instinctively from the beginning that unless I tumbled

out the dozen more or less of conceptions, I should bear them about forever, and year by year get straiter and stiffer in those horrible cross-bones with a long name, and at last parturition would be the curse indeed. It seems dispiriting for a man to hack away at trees in a wood, and at the end of his clearing come to rocks or the sea or whatever disappoints him as leading to nothing . . . if the real work should present itself to be done, I shall begin at once and in earnest . . . not having to learn first of all how to keep the axe-head from flying back into my face; and if I stop in the middle, let the bad business of other years show that I was not idle or altogether incompetent."—*Letters of Robert Browning and Alfred Domett.*

In a letter to Milsand, Browning wrote :

"The fact is that in the case of a writer with my peculiarities and habits, somebody quite ignorant of what I may have meant to write occupied with what is really written, is needed to supervise the thing produced."

To Miss Barrett he wrote of "Sordello" :

"Of course an Artist's whole problem must be, as Carlyle wrote to me, the expressing with articulate clearness, the thought in him—I am almost inclined to say that *clear expression* should be his only work and care, for he is born, ordained, such as he is—and not born learned in putting what was born in him into words—whatever *can* be clearly spoken out to be. But 'bricks and mortar' is very easily said, and some of the thoughts in 'Sordello' not so readily even if Miss Mitford were to try her hand on them. I sin forty times in a day by light words and untrue to the thought."—*Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett.*

But three lines of "Sordello" were written in Italy, so Browning stated; also that his past was there gained and put on record, and if he never wrote another word it would not matter, he had achieved his best in what was already written at that date, 1845.

He wrote the poem of "Sordello," he explained to Miss Barrett, to display a light that—

"first of all became present in a great light, a whole one—tell me how these lights are born if you can—the creative process confirms itself as inspiration, nothing more nor less, what you remember of them, but with that it begins, reflec-

tion is exactly what it names itself, a representation in scattered rays from every angle of incidence, of what first of all became present in a great light, a whole one. You get perhaps a considerable good in finding the world's accepted moulds everywhere into which you may run and fix your own fused metal, but not a grain Troy weight do you get of new gold, silver, or brass. After that you go boldly on your own resources and are justified to yourself that's all. I desire in this life to live and first write out certain things that are in me and so save my soul.”

“ You gain nothing by travel,” he wrote, “ but the discovery that you have gained nothing, and have done rightly in trusting to your innate ideas—or not rightly in distrusting as the case may be.”

In an incidental passage in his *Essay on Chapman*, a passage which was then considered famous : “ Periods as resplendent as the whirling wheels of Phœbus Apollo's Chariot,” Swinburne described the mind of Browning.

But thus Browning before him had pictured the mind of Sordello in the simile of the spider, which may, or may not, have furnished Swinburne's imagination for his description of Browning himself, accounted so much to the credit and insight of Swinburne when he wrote of him :

“ With what spider-like swiftness and sagacity his building spirit leaps and lightens to and fro and backwards and forwards as it lives along the animated line of its labours, springs from thread to thread, and darts from centre to circumference of the glittering quivering web of living thought woven from the inexhaustible stories of his perceptions and kindled from the inexhaustible fire of his imagination.”

Describing the mind of Sordello, Browning wrote :

“ Thus thrall reached thrall;
He o'er-festooning every interval,
As the adventurous spider, making light
Of distance, shoots her threads from depth to height,
From barbican to battlement: so flung
Fantasies forth and in their centre swung
Our architect,—the breezy morning fresh
Above and merry,—all his waving mesh
Laughing with lucid dew-drops rainbow-edged.”

It is stated in his biography that Swinburne was so enthusiastic about the poem of "Sordello" in early life that he held parties for the reading of it. In fact, says Mr. Alfred Noyes, in his "Life of William Morris," in the English Men of Letters Series, "The debt of the Pre-Raphaelites to Browning is far greater than is yet recognised."

In "Sordello" Browning gives an example of the nonsense that results from plagiarism, a passage in "Sordello" strangely quoted as a specimen of Browning's "obscurity" by Mr. Chesterton :

"As knops that stud some almug to the pith
Pricked for gum, wry thence and crinkled course
Than pursed up eyelids of a river horse
Sunning himself o' the slime when whirs the breeze."

"Gad-fly that is"—Browning scornfully sums up in this nonsense the borrower, the plagiarist, the user of another's ideas, the sucker of another's genius : "Gad-fly that is . . . he might compete with these."

In the placing of his work for humanity in the name of the outcast woman in "Sordello," Browning used no mere symbol. He was a hundred years before his time in this, as in the other spheres of his idealistic thought. To-day the social worker has taken up the torch lighted by his hand. The cause of the outcast woman is now not only brought into the open with pity and a passion for altruistic service ; the scrutiny of her situation is the question of both idealist and realist, the philanthropic worker and the man framing new laws to meet the new light upon the situation.

Musing on a ruined palace step in Venice, Browning spoke in his own person his altruistic dream :

"I ask youth and strength
And health for each of you, not more—at length
Grown wise, who asked at home that the whole race
Might add the spirit's to the body's grace."

"Sordello," Book III.

The outcast symbolised Sordello's Humanity :

“ You sad dishevelled ghost
That pluck at me and point, are you advised
I breathe?”

Says Browning of Sordello—make yourselves invisible, gaze into the life of young Sordello and see that there is no element in it that makes for you “ friend Naldo.”

A great work of Art, says Ruskin, has as many interpretations as readers.

“ The end of Art,” he says, “ is not to amuse. The end of Art is as serious as that of all other beautiful things—of the blue sky and the green grass and the clouds and the dew. They are either useless, or they are of much deeper function than giving amusement.

“ That art is the greatest,” he asserts, “ which conveys to the mind of the spectator by any means whatever, the greatest number of the greatest ideas, and I call an idea great in proportion as it is received by a higher faculty of the mind, and as it more fully occupies and in occupying exercises and exalts the faculty by which it is received.”

In the poem of “ Sordello ” Naldo the critic is asked to make himself invisible beside the developing Sordello and watch genius dawn :

“ Peer beside us and report indeed
If (your word) ‘ genius ’ dawning with throes and
stings.”

Dr. Channing says :

“ Genius is not a creator in the sense of fancying or feigning what does not exist; its distinction is to discern more of Truth than ordinary minds.”

Sir Joshua Reynolds says :

“ It is being conversant with the inventions of others that we learn to invent, as by reading the thoughts of others we learn to think. It is in vain for painters and poets to endeavour to invent without material on which the mind may work, and from which inventions must originate. Nothing can come of nothing. Homer is supposed to have been possessed of all the learning of his time; and we are

certain that Michael Angelo and Raffaelle were equally possessed of all the knowledge in the art which had been discovered in the works of their predecessors."

Says Professor Clouston in his work on the brain :

" There is one problem of brain-cell action which is very obscure. It is certain that all the cells are not at work at the same time. They work in relays as it were. At one moment there are comparatively few cells giving out energy, considering their enormous number. How certain groups are called into action is not understood. The amount and kind of their mental action that does not pass into consciousness is not yet understood. A nerve-cell is probably never unreceptive, its action may be unrecorded. It has the necessity to energise, but acts so sluggishly as to pass unnoticed by the consciousness. Emotion energises brain cells: anger, love, ambition, mental work set reserve cells to work, which give up their impressions of sights, sounds, memories, imaginations, pictures, every call to the attentions formed in its molecular groupings, but which have not come into the consciousness of the ego.

" The memory of past events may be permanently or temporarily lost by normal memory cells being damaged, or superseded by supra-normal brain cells set active. The brain may have a double stream of consciousness acting alternately by rapid change of brain mechanism from one place to the other, in response to outer calls upon it, or the supra-normal may so impose its activities upon the normal under, in so imperious a degree as to become an obsession excluding the normal, the subject being then commonly styled ' mad ' or of deranged mind; its machinery is but working under new laws. At times vision comes from such cell pictures without reference to the stimulus of outer presentations in response to stimuli of more delicate nature to highly placed cells and groupings called imagination centres, active only in brain cells of loftiest composition and more delicate nervous connections, potential in all minds, that precious inheritance from a spiritual ancestry—' soul.' These centres may never be aroused; it is the supreme business of all the other centres of cell activity to work together for the common triumph of bringing these cells into activity—all their machinery from beauty consciousness to pain consciousness works for the great end of bringing the soul to consciousness of itself."

Psychology also allows " that there may be a great climacteric of emotion out of which a great new con-

trolling idea may arise in response to great need or to great urgency of mind to produce a great new generalisation to master the question if the mind is confronted with the injury of itself or some other. It is probably an organic rearrangement of affairs of perception, etc.; it is a focussing of all the past incitation of memory to rearrange things neural or emotional to meet the emergency and accommodate itself to new and greater conditions. All antecedent consciousness is called upon, all past perceptions, all experience is related to the need of the moment to produce a new concept equal to the demand of the new need: a concept is an idea arising from the mental operation by means of which we bring together the common points of our various experiences and mentally consolidate them into an idea” (Herbert Angell, Professor Psychology, University of Chicago).

Thus psychology allows as possible, that in some few abnormal beings cerebral rearrangement may sometimes bring about sudden and complete changes in the superficial character and memory, as if with sudden wrench new faculty suddenly adapts itself to new environing influences. Man is a personality so multiplex that in sudden rearrangement some element hitherto submerged may come suddenly to light. To play upon those submerged seeds of being, to awaken the spiritual seed in man’s heredity, to vitalise and electrify soul, to shake the mind up to new combinations, to lead the mind up to the transcendental experiences of human life, was, whether it would or not, the inevitable crisis of Browning’s Art. The belief that emotion is one of the greatest agencies in the release of soul is one of Browning’s faiths—it is through stress and strain of emotion the soul works its passage from lower to higher; emotion as the agency of new conceptions and apprehensions is his poetical truth, and, asserted in poetical presentment and naked assertion, was a psychology new to his age, but becoming the commonplace now.

"I am of opinion that the theory of experience and of induction from experience needs further examination," said Mr. Arthur Balfour in his "Defence of Philosophic Doubt" in 1879, and "I am still of the opinion," he writes in the *Hibbert Journal* of 1911, "that the theory of experience and of induction from experience needs further examination; that the relation between a series of beliefs connected logically, and the same beliefs mixed up in a natural series of cause and effects, involves speculative difficulties of mind interest."

"The most important step forward that has occurred in psychology since I have been a student of that science is the discovery that, in certain subjects at least, there is not only the consciousness of the ordinary field with its usual centre and margin, but an addition thereto in the shape of a set of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside the primary consciousness altogether, yet able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs. I call this the most important step forward because, unlike the other advances which psychology has made, this discovery has revealed to us an entirely unsuspected peculiarity in the constitution of human nature."—*William James, LL.D., Harvard University.*

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CHAPTER VIII

SHORT POEMS ORIGINALLY ISSUED AS NOS. 3 AND 7 OF SERIES "BELLS AND POMEGRANATES"

Title explained—Published in monthly numbers—Cheap paper-covered booklets—Mr. Chesterton's “Browning.”

THE poem of “Sordello” fell stillborn from the press. Browning dropped even the mention of it. In his next venture, “Bells and Pomegranates,” it was announced as by the author of “Paracelsus” only.

Mr. Gosse reports in his “Personalia of Robert Browning” that :

“At that time the public absolutely declined to buy Mr. Browning’s books . . . he was silent after the production of ‘Strafford,’ but all the time busy with copious production. ‘Pippa Passes’ he concluded before 1840, and two Tragedies with the intention of seeing them acted. These plays, however, found no manager or publisher willing to accept them.”

“Sordello” being a failure, writes Mr. Gosse, and in the face of so much poetry still unprinted, Mr. Browning could not but ruefully remember how expensive his books had been to his sympathetic father. To go on indefinitely in this way was scarcely to be thought of, and yet poetry kept in a desk is a property that wears out the soul with hope deferred.

The situation was put before Moxon, the publisher, and a series of cheap paper-covered booklets arranged for at the cost of the elder Browning, eight numbers appearing under the general title of “Bells and Pomegranates.”

In one of her letters to Browning in 1846, Miss Barrett asks him for an explanation of the meaning of the title "Bells and Pomegranates." "What *can* be the meaning of the title Bells and Pomegranates?" she would know; she and Mr. Kenyon, "although they might be considered fairly intelligent," cannot arrive at the significance of the symbol. She thinks it may refer to the Hebraic priestly garment—she thinks it does, but Mr. Kenyon won't allow that, although confessing he has no reason to offer for it. She forgot to ask among the other things they have to talk about—remember the "Davuses" of the world are in the majority (*Davi sumus, non aedipi*).

She was quite right, is the answer: the title does symbolise the garment of Aaron, and he meant to convey that he was a singer and a speaker, a mixture of gay and grave—"singing and sermonising," a mixture that in the hour of creative confidence he intended to round off so in the end.

She had missed the point, then, is the reply, because she only saw the priestly garment, not the Rabbinical significance under it. And Vasari, she reminds him, is not the textbook of the world. Why should not the world be taught his design? She would tease—she would persist.

He promises to provide amusement and instruction to the world by explaining himself in the next number, but the note and explanation are not satisfactory. His correspondent answers that she has forced him at the bayonet's point into the explanation, and he hides it, or almost hides it, amid the matter of the title-page of the "Soul's Tragedy." The explanation seems to explain, but "Faith and Works," that seems inapplicable to her; to which he replies that "Dante also had a pomegranate fruit in his hand, and pomegranate crowned Raffaelo. His thought looked too ambitious, he answered; he preferred the symbol."

No. 1 of "Bells and Pomegranates" contained "Pippa

Passes"; No. 2, "King Victor and King Charles"; No. 3, "Dramatic Lyrics"; No. 4, "The Return of the Druses"; No. 5, "A Blot on the 'Scutcheon'"; No. 6, "Colombe's Birthday"; No. 7, "Dramatic Romances and Lyrics"; concluding with "Luria" and "A Soul's Tragedy" as No. 8.

The poem of "Pippa Passes" was designed as a drama, but was never offered for stage production by Browning. It reveals four critical periods in four different dramas of Italian life, which display the author's meaning, which, he informed Mr. Gosse, was to "symbolise the unconscious messenger of good spiritual tidings to so many souls in dark places." It was his favourite poem, he confessed to Miss Barrett, and she replied that she envied him having written it.

The concluding lines of "Sordello" give hint of the little singer of Asolo, but it was a boy who sang the old song that impressed the mind of the poet there; in the poem of "Pippa Passes" it is a girl, the humblest of beings—the little Pippa, silk-winder of Asolo, who drops her vital song into the four dark places of the drama.

The poem bears a dedication to Mr. Serjeant Talfourd, whose tragedy of "Ion" was the "world's wonder of the time," which success inspired Browning to attempt dramatic writing. The author in an explanatory note discloses the meaning of his work :

" This drama is hinged on the chance appearance of Pippa, a poor child, at work all the year round (save one day) at the silk-mills of Asolo in Northern Italy, at a critical moment in the spiritual life history of the leading characters of the play. Just when their emotions, passions, motives are swinging backwards and forwards, Pippa passes by singing some refrain, and her song determines the actions and fashions the emotions of men and women to whom she was unknown."

Pippa, the singer of Asolo, passes her one day's holiday in gladsome freedom from work, and in trusting faith that

"God's in His Heaven, All's right with the world"; and after her one day of holiday goes back to her humble task convinced that—

"All service ranks the same with God,
With God whose puppets best and worst are we."

As her song falls upon the ears of the guilty pair of lovers in the first episode of the poem, a blinding flash of conviction of his evil situation seizes the mind of Sebald, and his conscience awakes to sense of his treachery. His unbridled passion suddenly sees itself in the light of "God in His Heaven," and as the words of the refrain reach his ears his lustful passion turns to sudden loathing :

"*Sebald.* God's in His Heaven! Do you hear that?
Who spoke? You, you spoke!"

Ottima. Oh, that little ragged girl!

She must have rested on the step: we give them
But this one holiday the whole year round.

Did you ever see our silk-mills—their inside?
There are ten silk-mills now belong to you.
She stoops to pick my double heart's-ease,

Sh!

She does not hear: call you out louder.

Sebald. Leave me!

Go get your clothes on—dress those shoulders!

Ottima. Sebald!

Sebald. Wipe off that paint! I hate you!

Ottima. Miserable.

Sebald. My God, and she is emptied of it now;
Outright now! how miraculously gone
All of the grace—had she not strange grace once?
Why, the blank cheek hangs listless as it likes,
No purpose holds the features up together,
Only the cloven brow and puckered chin
Stay in their places: and the very hair
That seemed to have a sort of life in it,
Drops a dead web.

Ottima. Speak to me—not of me.

Sebald. That round great full-orbed face, when not
an angle
Broke the delicious indolence—all broken!

I hate, hate—curse you! God's in His Heaven.

Ottima.

Me!

Me! no, no, Sebald, not yourself—kill me!

Mine is the whole crime. Do but kill me—then

Yourself—then—presently—first hear me speak!

I always meant to kill myself—wait, you!

Lean on my breast—not as a breast—don't love me

The more because you lean on me, my own Heart's
Sebald!

There, there both deaths presently!

Sebald. My brain is drowned now—quite drowned.

All I feel

Is . . . is, at swift recurring intervals,

A hurry-down within me, as if waters

Loosened to smother up some ghastly pit.

There they go—whirls from a black fiery sea!

Ottima. Not me—to him, oh God, be merciful."

In this realism by Art Browning was pioneer. "I precede my age," said Paracelsus. The passion of an Ottima and Sebald is an every-day incident of the literature of to-day : in Browning's time it was a new thing to draw the curtain off this relation of sordid, sensuous passion. These elements of tragedy always underlying human life came to light under Browning's Art in his relentless reach and passion for truth.

As the song of Pippa falls into the threatened tragedy of the life of Jules in the next episode, his chivalry springs, compassion goes out to the girl he was about to spurn ; this song of Pippa's, its generosity, changes his mood, and defeats the mean souls who have plotted to disgrace him :

" Is she wronged? To the rescue of her honour my heart.

Is she poor? What costs it to be styled a donor?"

Humanity awakes in the heart of Jules the artist. At the appeal of the outcast woman, his soul rises to the call and previsages for them a new life together. He sees the need of him by the poor girl foisted on him by the jealous band of his fellow-students. He decides that he and she will frustrate the poor plot and together rise in

" Some unsuspected isle in the far seas."

Into the mouth of the vulgar student Schramm is placed the message of evolution in plain prose, tracing the unfolding from seed to blossom, from blossom to fruit. So with soul all too is evolution, is a proceeding and unfolding, a creating of what is to be from what is : the message of evolution that nothing in the process is useless :

“ As well affirm that your eye is no longer in your body, because its earliest favourite whatever it may have first loved to look on, is dead and done with—as that any affection is lost to the soul when its first object whatever happened first to satisfy it, is superseded in due course. Keep for ever looking, whether with the body’s eye or the mind’s, and you will soon find something to wonder at. Has a man done wondering at women ? There follow men, dead and alive to wonder at. Has he done wondering at men ? there’s God to wonder at : and the faculty of wonder may be at the same time old and tired enough with respect to its first object, and yet young and fresh sufficiently, so far as concerns its novel one.”

In the next story in the poem the song of Pippa falls upon the ear of Luigi the patriot, talking his revolutionary purpose out with his mother, who would dissuade him from it and bids him mistrust his plan. They talk of life. Luigi loves his life, yet is prepared to lose it. He thinks it his duty as a patriot to kill this despot. His mother urges delay, but even should he die, he says :

“ God must be glad that one loves his earth so much.
 I can give news of earth to all the dead
 Who ask me : last year’s sunsets and great stars
 Which had a right to come first, and see ebb
 The crimson wave that drifts the sun away.
 Those crescent moons with notched and burning rims
 That strengthened into sharp fire—and that day
 In March a double rainbow stopped the storm.
 May’s warm, slow, mellow moonlit summer nights—
 Gone are they, but I have them in my soul.”

Luigi the patriot sings his hope of posterity’s love :

“ You’ll love me yet—and I can tarry
 Your love’s protracted growing :
 June reared the bunch of flowers you carry
 From seeds of April’s sowing.

“ I plant a heartful now—some seed
 At least is sure to strike
 And yield—what you'll not pluck, indeed
 Not love, but may be, like.

“ You'll look at least on love's remains
 A grave's one violet:
 You'll look?—that pays a thousand pains.
 What's death? You'll love me yet.”

“ Why go to-night?” remonstrated the mother of Luigi.
 “ Morn's for adventure.” Jupiter is now a morning star.
 Luigi reminds her of who said, “ I am the bright and
 morning star,” and promised it to him who overcame :
 “ to such a one I give the morning star.” The gift of the
 morning star! “ Have I God's gift of the morning star?”
 he wonders. His purpose is weakening under his mother's
 pleading for delay, when Pippa's song tells him :

“ A King lived long ago
 In the morning of the world
 When earth was nigher Heaven than now.”

At the reminder of the great Kings of old, the purpose
 of Jules firms to kill the corrupt king of his country :

“ 'Tis God's voice calls,” he exclaims, “ how could I
 stay?”

As Pippa's song falls upon the ears of the great Bishop,
 who is being tempted by his avaricious brother to engage
 in a plot to ruin little Pippa herself, and take her patri-
 mony securely, that she has already been robbed of, his
 lower self is slain, the higher man rises in wrath, as the
 trusting words of Pippa reach him, and with violent
 impulse of justice cries : “ Gag this villain—tie him hand
 and foot. He dares. I know not half he dares, but
 remove him—quick! Miserere Mei, Domine. Quick, I
 say!”

Over the poem of “ Pippa Passes” the ironies of mis-
 conception play. Pippa herself has no conception of the
 dark places she is illuminating; she believes them the

" happiest four in Asolo " ; she soliloquises in drowsy envy of : " Great haughty Ottima and her Sebald's homage " ; of holy " Monsignor," the pious man, the man devoid of blame ; of Luigi, starting out of his turret so suddenly, " doubtless departed on some good errand or another."

The fine wonder at the natural song of nature is expressed in the concluding lines as the music of lark, mavis, merle, and throstle ; the harsher notes of owls and bats, crows and twats, complete the day.

In trusting simplicity Pippa looks forward to her next day's silk-winding, happy in the thought that God needs her work for purposes of His own, that she knows nothing of, and the silk she is to wind to-morrow may bind the hem of Ottima's cloak.

With limpid resignation Pippa returns to her humble silk-winding, singing her trusting song :

" No doubt some way or other hymns say right.
All service ranks the same with God,
With God whose puppets best and worst
Are we : there is no last nor first."

Ruskin objected to a poet of Browning's real dramatic power allowing himself to appear through all manner of characters, " so that every now and then poor Pippa herself shall speak a long piece of Browning " : so he wrote in a letter to Browning. " I may put Robert Browning into Pippa and other men and maids," was Browning's reply. " If so, peccavi."

Of Browning's personality at this time Mrs. Bridell-Fox wrote :

" I remember him as looking in often in the evenings, having just returned from his visit to Venice. He was full of enthusiasm for the Queen of Cities ; he used to illustrate his glowing descriptions of its beauties, the palaces, the sunsets, the moonrises, by the most original kind of drawing. My own passionate longing to see Venice dates from those delightful well-remembered evenings of childhood ; he was

slim, dark and very handsome—full of ambition, eager for success, eager for fame, and to achieve success."

Nos. 3 and 7 of "Bells and Pomegranates" contained the "Dramatic Romances and Lyrics of Browning, written at odd times between the years 1833 and 1846. No. 3 contained : "Cavalier Tunes"; "Italy and France"; "Italy," afterwards renamed "My Last Duchess"; "France," renamed later "Count Gismond": "Incident of the French Camp"; "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister"; "In a Gondola"; "Artemis Prologizes"; "Waring"; "Rudel and the Lady of Tripoli"; "Cristina"; the two poems first published in the *Monthly Repository* over the name of "Z," here bracketed together with the title "Madhouse Cells"; "Through the Metidga to Abd-er-Kadr"; and "The Pied Piper of Hamelin."

It was from the deck of the *Norham Castle*, while in the Mediterranean, during his first voyage to Italy, that some of Browning's best known poems were written.

Included in No. 3 were the two poems, the most directly patriotic of Browning's work : "Home Thoughts from the Sea," and "Home Thoughts from Abroad."

To all asking how they can serve England best, he replies, to do as he did when under the shadow of Trafalgar, with memories multiplying of the points where England had helped him : to such enquiry he replies :

" Say, Whoso turns to God as I, this morning turn to God
to praise and pray
While Jove's planet rises yonder silent over Africa."

At this same time he writes out, in a wave of memory of his Strafford studies probably, the four "Cavalier Tunes" in honour of those "great-hearted gentlemen singing their songs," songs of loyalty to England and its King, as "Home Thoughts from Abroad" enshrined his own loyalty to far-off England; and "How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix," too, enshrines times

of war and joy of riding, and all the home-sickness of a wanderer.

This poem is reminiscent of the long ride through the Netherlands to Russia, when Browning and his friends made the long journey at galloping speed through the Low Countries in 1834. It is a stirring recital of what might have happened during the war in the Netherlands and praises Browning's good horse "York," upon whose back he enjoyed the memory of riding at the time the poem was written. The horse in the poem is called "Roland," the real hero of the poem, the noble creature who, responding to the emotion of its rider, bore on and on, past the other horses dropping dead under the strain. So noble "Roland" had the whole good news to bear to the war-racked people of Aix. Roland's gallop, with the romance of Rat-land in the "Pied Piper," shared honours of making the name of Browning known. There is no sort of historical foundation about this poem, "How they Brought the Good News," he wrote in 1881. "I wrote it under the bulwark of a vessel off the African Coast, after I had been at sea long enough to appreciate even the fancy of a gallop on the back of a certain good horse York then in my stable at home."

"Through the Metidga" is another poem of war and the joy of riding. It was founded upon the story of the struggle of an Algerian Prince against the French in 1833, also written at sea off the coast of Africa. "Home Thoughts from the Sea" and "Home Thoughts from Abroad" enshrine Browning's patriotic passion for England, and all the love of its beauty is in the lines :

"O to be in England
Now that April's there."

"In a Gondola" was published in 1842 in No. 3 of "Bells and Pomegranates."

The poem was originated by a request from the artist for a verse for the painter's picture in the Academy called

"The Serenade." The poem interprets the picture—a presentation of love and life in Italy, intrigue and assassination and secrecy around this precious hour of the lovers in the gondola. The lover receives the stab he expected; he craves one more kiss from his beloved:

"I have lived indeed and so can die."

"Artemis Prologuizes" is a fragment intended to precede a play which was never written.

The poem is a classic of Euripides. Theseus to gain the love of Hippolyta has to fight her in single combat. She accompanied him to Athens; their son offends Venus by despising her feminine charm for the worship of Artemis. Venus vows to ruin him, and first Hippolyta dies and Theseus remarries Phædra, daughter of Minos, King of Crete. Phædra conceives a guilty passion for Hippolytus, inspired by Venus: the young man resents her passion. Phædra, disgraced, determines to take her own life, and accuses Hippolytus of attempts on her virtue. He is banished by his angry father. A sea monster frightens the horses of his chariot; he is mangled mortally, but Diana appears by his dying couch with words of comfort; she hands him over to Æsculapius, the god of healing, and awaits the result.

"Garden Fancies" was first published in *Hood's Magazine* in July, 1844. "The Flower's Name" describes a garden with hallowed memories of a woman the speaker loves; he fancifully conceits certain things about the flower's names after her fingers have touched them.

No. 11, "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis," is the picture of a garden in which there is no romance. The story is of the impulsive throwing away of a book that irritated the reader: he throws it away to rot and decay in its proper place, but sense of there being others in the world beside himself, altruistic thought, asserts itself, and the disappointed reader, conceiving that others might value the

book even if it irritated him, draws it out from its dark resting-place and restores it to the shelves of his library. It was a book pedantic, and to his mind rubbish, centuries old, stoutly printed and bound ; it has, for once, had the frolic and stir of nature about it in its prison of the tree. He had read the book out of curiosity of its reputed learning, and having thrown it away in disgust, found something more human and enjoyed it with—

“ Half a cheese and a bottle of chablis
Lay on the grass and forgot the oaf
Over a jolly chapter of Rabelais.”

The old pedant's book was restored for learning's sake to a place amid a variety of books to remain undisturbed to “ dry-rot at ease till the Judgment Day.”

The poem of “ Waring ” commemorates one of Browning's early friends, Alfred Domett, son of a naval officer who had fought against the Dutch. The Brownings and the Dometts were neighbours of Camberwell days. Alfred Domett was younger than Browning by a year and thirteen days, having been born May 20th, 1814. It was the elder brothers of Domett who were Browning's friends and schoolfellows, at the Rev. Mr. Ready's School. Acquaintance with Alfred was not made till about 1840.

Domett's career was varied. In 1832 he published a volume of poems, one year before Browning published “ Pauline.” He did desultory literary work, travelled extensively in America and Continental countries, then turned to law and was called to the Bar in 1841. It was at this time, in 1840-41, that the friendship between Browning and Domett ripened to intimacy. Domett's love of travel, however, ended personal intercourse. In 1842 he became enamoured of the possibilities of New Zealand, and suddenly disappeared, though not so unexpectedly as the poem indicates. His friends knew of his intention, and of his negotiations with the New Zealand Land Company, then pushing the colonisation of New Zealand, after

the Treaty of Waitangi promised settled terms of occupation to colonists.

The poem of "Waring" commemorates this early friend, who became notable in New Zealand as politician and administrator, who became Colonial Secretary, and subsequently Commissioner of Crown Lands, first in Napier, in which town he placed upon their streets the well-known names of English men of letters, which still remain as mark of its early connection with an Englishman of letters.

He attained to the highest position the colony could give, becoming the Prime Minister in 1862. To this friend in New Zealand Browning wrote constantly; his published correspondence with Alfred Domett gives valuable light upon this period of Browning's life :

"We are dead asleep in literary things and in great want of 'rousing work' (as the old Puritans phrase it)," Browning wrote to Domett. "My own health is none of the best—I go out but seldom. I saw your father at Chapel yesterday. So glides this foolish life away week by week! I have a desk full of scrawls at which I look and work a little.

"Macready has used me vilely!

"They take to criticising me a little more, in the Reviews, and God send I be not too proud of their abuse! For there is no hiding the fact that it is of the proper old drivelling virulence, with which God's Great have in all ages been regaled. Out of the myriad things that could be written of, scarcely one seems worthier note than another. I have certain plans which shall either fail or succeed but not lie dormant. You are veritably nearer to me than the people in the city five miles off. I make no new friends, which is a pity, but find better and better reasons for the faith that is in me.

"The effect of the failure or partial success of the Tragedy will be the same, namely to make me work, work, work. People read my works a little more, they say, and I have some real works here in hand, but now that I could find it in my heart to labour earnestly, I doubt if I shall ever find it in my head, which sings and whirls and stops me even now at this minute.

"The most notable thing of the year (1845) has been to me the visit of Father Mathew, the temperance advocate to

London—this reverting to the simplest form of worship (for the converts are converts to his hand and voice and eye, and nothing beyond), all these men choosing to become better, because he, who was standing there better—he bade them so become. I stood on the scaffold with him and heard him preach beside."—*Letters of Robert Browning and Alfred Domett.*

Another poem, "Time's Revenges," bearing an allusion to Domett, was published in No. 7 of "Bells and Pomegranates" in 1845. It is a soliloquy about a friend over the sea who would do anything for him, whom he but likes, and who gets on his nerves, and, as human love cannot be forced, the fact must be borne good-humouredly. This friend over the sea loves him and his books, and is indignant because both are not better appreciated. And there is another—his lady, to whom he in his turn is equally devoted, who is as equally dissatisfied with him; do as he will, she would roast him before a slow fire to gain her will. So time has its revenges; his friend would do anything for his love, and he would do anything to gain from his mistress the approval he craved. The poem is subtle juxtaposition of a human love and the divine obsession of service to that tyrannical mistress, "La Belle Sans Merci," whom Idealists serve. For this woman he says his spirit is filled with desire; but she—I'll tell you—calmly would decree him to the flames to gain her own desire.

"Where are you, dear old friend?
How rolls the Wairoa at your world's far end?"

The Guardian Angel.

"Strange melodies"

That lustrous Song-Child languished to impart,
Breathing his boundless love through boundless art—
Impassioned Seraph from his mint of gold
By our full-handed Master-Maker flung;
By him whose lays, like eagles, still up-wheeling
To that shy Empyrean of high feeling,
Float steadiest in the luminous fold on fold
Of wonder-cloud around its sun-depths rolled.

Whether he paint, all patience or pure snow,
 Pompilia's fluttering innocence unsoiled ;—
 In verse, though fresh as dew, one lava-flow
 In fervour—with rich Titian-dyes aglow—
 Paint Paracelsus, to grand frenzy stung,
 Quixotic dreams and fiery quackeries foiled ;—
 Or—of Sordello's delicate Spirit unstrung
 For action, in its vast Ideal's glare
 Blasting the real to its own dumb despair,—
 On that Venetian water-lapped stair-flight
 In words condensed to diamond indite
 A lay dark spangled as star-spangled Night ;—
 Still—though the pulses of the world wide throng
 He wields, with racy life-blood beat so strong—
 Sublest Assertor of the Soul in song !'

Dedication to Browning in "Ranolf and Amotria," by Alfred Domett.

In the poem "Cristina" the woman described is a coquette. She throws her glances of love indiscriminately, out of sheer excess of the love demand ; she greets all men with passion's glance. Sometimes her glances fell harmlessly, but to others, like the speaker in the poem, who is not built of unresponsive material, her glances raise a whirl of responsive passion which the coquette in passing is heedless of.

So Nature coquettes with men's souls : in passing, she wrings a moment of supreme emotion from the soul, and, as in a Divine coquetry, passes on to stir the same emotion in another. These divine glances are rare and for ever memorable, and seem the sole moment of a lifetime when they come to which the remainder of life is but a trifling :

" Oh, we're sunk enough here, God knows,
 But not quite so sunk that moments
 Sure though seldom, are denied us
 When the spirit's true endowments
 Stand out plainly from its false ones
 And apprise it if pursuing
 Or the right way or the wrong way,
 To its triumph or undoing.

“ There are flashes struck from midnights,
 There are fire-flames noondays kindle
 Whereby piled-up honours perish,
 Whereby swol’n ambitions dwindle,
 While just this or that poor impulse
 Which for once had play unstifled,
 Seems the sole work of a life-time
 That away the rest have trifled.

“ Oh, observe. Of course, next moment
 The world’s honours, in derision
 Trampled out the light for ever:
 Never fear but there’s provision
 Of the devil’s to quench knowledge
 Lest we walk the earth in rapture!
 Making those who catch God’s secret
 Just so much more prize their capture !”

“ *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* ” was written at the house of Macready, at Elstree, on one of the week-end visits so prized by Browning. It was dashed off to amuse “ W. M. the Younger,” to whom it is dedicated. The little boy was ill; he wanted something to illustrate, and the frolic and fun and fanciful soliloquising of Rat-land was the result, with its Orphic compulsion and practical common-sense ending.

So little did Browning think of this *jeu d’esprit*, that it was only drawn from the desk to fill up a space in the third number of “ *Bells and Pomegranates* ”; but with this poem Browning piped knowledge of himself into the general heart, and the common comprehension of the reading public, which obstinately remained shut to the other treasures of “ *Bells and Pomegranates*. ”

This piece of apparently whimsical work carries Browning’s characteristic wealth of imagery, though but of rat-land—that fertility of descriptive language, and his human sympathy with the suffering and those handicapped in life’s march. It is given to the delicate and physically unequal to the general march of the laughing, dancing children to tell the tale of Orphic mystery; the honour of spokesman is given to the lame boy of interpreting the allurement of the piper :

“ He led us, he said, to a joyous land,
 Joining the town and just at hand,
 Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew
 And flowers put forth a fairer hue
 And everything was strange and new.”

So take the lesson, says the poet to “ W. M. the Younger ” :

“ So, Willy, let you and me be wipers
 Of scores out with all men—especially pipers.”

The poem “ The Boy and the Angel ” first appeared in *Hood’s Magazine* in 1844 ; it was revised and five additional couplets added, forming one of the numbers of “ Bells and Pomegranates.”

This may or may not have been founded upon some legend : it presents that faith of medieval Christianity, the mystic’s purity of faith that angels concern themselves intimately with the lives of the devout. The poor boy Theocrite plied his trade in a mood of praise to God and faithfulness to his work. So passionate is his faith that he longs to do some greater thing for God than this humble work : he would praise Him in the great way of the Pope from St. Peter’s dome. Gabriel, the Archangel, relieved him of his humble work, and he was translated to Rome. But the praise of the Angel was too sure. God missed the human note of faith—Theorite must return. God needs human service, human praise, human love, as recognition of His power and love to man acknowledged by faith :

“ Morning, evening, noon, and night,
 ‘ Praise God,’ sang Theocrite.”

To his angelic substitute, God said :

“ ‘ A praise is in mine ear ;
 There is no doubt in it, no fear :
 ‘ Clearer loves sound other ways :
 I miss my little human praise.’ ”

“ Pictor Ignotus ” is a poem having for its theme the nature of true artistry. The shrinking of the great artist

from the material profit of his work, the invincible repugnance to the money question, is portrayed in the poem of "Pictor Ignotus," that unknown struggling painter who could not leave his ideal to please picture buyers—the doctrine of the market-place to supply the public with what it wants rather than that of the artist to supply it with what it ought to want.

It is a presentation of artistic passion that works obscurely for his monastery, filling its cloisters with picture after picture of Virgins, Babes, and Saints. He could do more popular work, which would have brought him fame, but he does not aspire to please men, but God; and, without jealousy, Pictor Ignotus sees the work of others approved. His work is not for the thoughtless; he does not expect to be popular—he has his dream of triumph of being greeted by learning and genius. He shrinks into his work, in reality hating to have his work dragged down to the poor daily prate of the buyers of their work, afraid of the petty vulgar gaze, as—

" Shrinking, as from the soldiery a nun,

· · · · ·
And see their faces, listen to their prate";

To hear themselves discussed in petty praise:

" ' This I love, or this I hate,'
' This likes me more, and this affects me less!'
Wherefore I choose my portion";

and the sanctuary, says Pictor Ignotus,

" shall ward
Vain tongues from where my pictures stand apart:
Only prayer breaks the silence of the shrine."

" Earth's Immortalities" is a picture of decayed fame. The speaker is at the tomb of one famous, but the grave is untended, the tombstone is sinking, lichen covers the name on it—so fame passes forgotten; and beside is the tomb of a lover unloved and forgotten too: such are the immortalities of earth.

The poem "The Lost Leader" was credited with being a reflection on Wordsworth's change of view after the French Revolution; but Browning later protested against the hardening of his words to apply to a particular man: it was a protest for liberalism—not to be taken as serious reflection on Wordsworth's personality.

It was but a youthful piece of hasty judgment, and underlying it the revolt of his soul at the selling of a poet's conviction for worldly advantages—that eye to public opinion or patronage of the politician which ends in the "handful of silver" and "ribbon to stick in his coat." He was for the great band who write for genius' sake: Shakespeare, Milton, Burns, Shelley "were with us—they watch from their graves."

"The Lost Mistress" appeared in "Bells and Pomegranates," No. 7. It is a poem of humility and devotion to the mistress he has lost. It breathes humility and sacrifice: he affects not to feel the blow of her loss, but his deeps are frozen; he is joyless; all is summed up as over between them. But nature still commands his interest: he notes the song of birds, observes the blossoming of buds, the snowdrops appearing by custom; but the gush of spring is over, his heart is stagnant, his soul holds the voice of his lost mistress, and he may hold her hand so little longer than a mere friend.

"Nay, but you who do not love her," is the utterance of a lover as he hints the pure gold of his love's nature reflected in the golden tress he is handling: to him it is a beautiful memory beyond praise:

" If earth holds aught—speak truth—above her?
Above this tress, and this I touch
But cannot praise, I love so much."

"The Englishman in Italy" ("Piano di Sorrento"—The Plain of Sorrento) was published in No. 7 of "Bells and Pomegranates," 1845.

The Englishman of the poem is seated by the side of an

Italian girl ; they are sheltering from the coming sirocco —a storm of wind from Africa. The girl is saying her rosary ; the man is describing the points of Italian life which interest him—all its nature life, all the landscape spreading before them, and all the stir to protect property which arises at the prospect of the coming storm : with faithful realism the poem paints the Italian landscape about Sorrento.

They have crept into shelter, the Englishman and the girl, and he wiles away the time with description of the luxuriance of nature, the fertility of the land, and the resourcefulness of the people. He relates how he rode up the mountain yesterday—up and up—all that day, by the way, till at last there was the sky, heaven's crystal and its blue—that profundity of sky and mountain which induced in him gravity and fear. Now the sea's profundity affects him : he tells the tale of Ulysses and the Sirens ; he and she will visit these caves and hear this secret song Ulysses heard.

But the storm ceases, the sun shines, life is astir again. The maiden beside him has fallen half asleep under his talk ; they will now see the preparation for the Feast of the Rosary, the anniversary festival of the Church of the day that the Catholic powers destroyed the Turkish fleet at Lepanto, and devotions now to Our Lady of the Rosary are due for her having won this contest for them. He pictures the morrow in the church : the brother who will preach, the banners and decorations, the altar ablaze with lights, the music, the statue of the Virgin borne in solemn procession over the plain, the bonfires, fireworks, the trumpet blowing. It will be a stirring day, and the Englishman will enjoy it as much as the child.

For such trifles, says the girl—"Trifles!" he exclaims, and concludes with the indignant remark : "Why, in England they are gravely debating the righteousness of abolishing the tax on corn" : the controversy raging just then in England was the Repeal of the Corn Laws.

The poem paints with meticulous fidelity the landscape beauty of Italy—its fruitfulness and plenty—while starving people in England cannot get the laws that would let the products of other lands feed them abolished.

“The Italian in England” is a poem of Italy during the Austrian oppression; an Italian patriot in hiding from the Austrian troops. The story is told in reminiscence from his safe asylum in England; it is of the manner of his escape from his persecution: how in passing he caught the glance of a peasant girl. He had been hiding in discomfort in an old aqueduct three days; he looked out for a face to trust. He is hungry and desperate. At last a peasant girl passes; she saw his sign to her, she understood, and when he threw his glove she picked it up, noted the place, and followed her party. He had attracted her notice impulsively. Her face was noble; he knew he could trust her. She returned; he asked for writing materials and preferred the request that she would carry his letter to the Cathedral at Padua, go into a certain confessional and whisper the password. She promised, and returned in three days; she brought food and drink, told him her lover would aid him. The search for him slackened, help came from Padua; he kissed her hand and blessed her. She followed him to the seashore—he sailed for England and never saw her again, and now he sits reflecting his past. He must stay in England; his party has made terms with the Austrians—his old patriotism would be awkward for them; but the woman who saved him he craved to see, to hear how she was faring once more, to kiss her hand and give her his blessing.

But reminiscing is unfruitful—he turns to business. During this holiday in Italy, Browning visited the church to become famous as “St. Praxed’s.” Of the knowledge and truth in this poem a critic like Ruskin wrote: “I know no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit. It is nearly all that I said of the

Central Renaissance in thirty pages of ‘The Stones of Venice’ put into as many lines”—Browning’s also being the antecedent work.

The return journey from Italy was made by way of the Tyrol and Germany. Out of this experience he wrote the poem “Tokay”—one of the three poems grouped together later as “Nationality in Drinks.”

“Tokay” represents Germany, and in the cocksure military strut, the swaggering, spur-clanking, stand-off, very able, challenging impudence of the little man from Ausbrusch, with his twisting of the red moustache, and his drouth that not even Tokay (the rich highly prized wine of Northern Hungary) could conquer, this little poem reads like prophecy.

The juxtaposition of “Claret,” a poem representing France, as the second of “Nationality in Drinks,” is also remarkable as forecast. They were written in 1844, and in the poem “Claret” is anxiety for the fate of France; and, as an addenda and reply to both, is “Beer”—an apostrophe to the English national beverage, written in 1845 as second part of “Home Thoughts from Abroad.”

The juxtaposition of three nationalities, and their bracketing later, was prophetical; we see “Claret,” like—

“ some gay French lady
Caught up from Life’s light and motion,
And dropped into Death’s silent ocean ! ”

The poet’s heart sank for France he loved, at the sight of its Teutonic neighbour :

“ Stout and able,
Arms and accoutrements all in order.”

But prompt comes the toast of England :

“ Here’s to Nelson’s memory !
”Tis the second time that I, at sea,
Right off Cape Trafalgar here,
Have drunk it deep in British Beer.

Nelson for ever—any time
Am I his to command in prose or rhyme !
Give me of Nelson only a touch,
And I guard it, be it little or much :
Here's one the Captain gives, and so
Down at the word, by George, shall it go !
He says that at Greenwich they show the beholder
Nelson's coat ' still with tar on the shoulder :
For he used to lean with one shoulder digging,
Jigging, as it were, and zig-zag-zigging
Up against the mizzen-rigging ! ' "

The poem "The Flight of the Duchess" was begun in 1842, but put aside owing to the interruption of a visitor, and recalled to the poet's mind, some months later, by the remark of a fellow-guest at a country-house (probably Macready's) that the deer had already to break the ice in the pond. "The word 'deer' was the link back to the poem of 'The Flight of the Duchess,' and the ending was conceived on the spot, although not written down till his return to London."—*From Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett.*

The beginning of the poem, then, was written before the fact of Browning's and Miss Barrett's acquaintance and her flight from the family home—it is loosely believed that that was the inspiration of the poem to Browning. He started out, he declared, but to place on record his old passion for freedom at sight of the gypsies packing up and making off to new fields. The gypsy life had fired his imagination in boyhood; there are traditions of his having followed and lived with the gypsies as a child. Gypsy encampments were a feature at the shows and fairs in the riverside near Camberwell.

The scene of the poem "The Flight of the Duchess" is placed in Germany, and is a picture, on the face of it, of Teutonic character and custom.

The story relates the tyranny of a German husband over the young bride "fresh from her convent," aided and abetted by the mother-in-law. It pictures the medieval

ideal of the Teuton ; the sickening customs of the chase, the coarse enjoyment of it ; and the tyranny of the husband who would revive it to further subdue the shrinking bride, and because he had been told, too, that—

“ The Mid-Age was the Heroic Time,” and
“ He revived all usages thoroughly worn out ”;

and to the Castle came the little Duchess :

“ My friend, I have seen a white crane bigger !
She was the smallest lady alive,
Made in a piece of Nature’s madness,
Too small, almost, for the life and gladness
That over-filled her ”—with eyes that
“ As much as thanked me as she looked.”

So the old serving-man who tells the story related her home-coming to the Duke :

“ And, as if his backbone were not jointed,
The Duke stepped rather aside than forward,
And welcomed her with his grandest smile ;
And, mind you, his mother, all the while
Chilled in the rear, like a wind to Nor’ward.”

In face of her welcome :

“ The Lady’s face stopped its play,
As if her first hair had grown gray—
For such things must begin some one day.”

The poem “ The Flight of the Duchess ” pictures on the face of it the customs of Germany : the personages are, for this purpose, the husband with his coarse meanness, the mother-in-law with her tyrannical ways, the old serving-man of the Castle, the maid Jacyntha, and the old witch who rode on to the scene and rescued the young convent-bred wife from the clutches of her oppressors. The old serving-man alone witnessed the scene between the witch and the little Duchess—Jacyntha the maid having unaccountably fallen asleep, so saw nothing of the transformation that came to the Duchess, who was left in their charge, imprisoned by the husband, for the bride

had become mute and rebellious and was to be punished. Jacynth the maid fell asleep, and the serving-man alone saw the deliverance of the little Duchess.

What happened quite the serving-man cannot tell; he was confused at the transformation, as he saw the old crone change to the comforter of the Duchess and the transfiguration of the little Duchess:

“The Lady at her knees coiled like a child at ease:
Her upturned face met the face of the crone
Wherein the eyes had grown and grown
As if she could double and quadruple
At pleasure the play of either pupil.”

And the Duchess looking with eyes upturned:

“It was life her eyes were drinking.”

But he carried the gage his mistress gave him as she rode off—the simple gage that showed she knew of his loyalty and faithfulness to her—a tress of her hair:

“I say, although she never used me,
Yet when she was mounted, the Gypsy behind her,
And I ventured to remind her,
I suppose with a voice of less steadiness
Than usual, for my feeling exceeded me,
—Something to the effect that I was in readiness
Whenever God should please she needed me,—
Then, do you know, her face looked down on me
With a look that placed a crown on me,
And she felt in her bosom,—mark, her bosom,—
And, as a flower-tree drops its blossom,
Dropped me—ah, had it been a purse
Of silver, my friend, or gold, that’s worse,
Why, you see, as soon as I found myself
So understood,—that a true heart so may gain
Such a reward,—I should have gone home again,
Kissed Jacynth, and soberly drowned myself!”

The art of Browning plays round the romance of soul time after time, this deeper region of personality, from which, rising in eruptive force through the human, the spiritual being asserts its claim for existence, leaving the

intellect with as much to ruminate over as the stout serving-man of the poem confessed to after witnessing the transformation.

The serving-man vows he will follow his mistress, but first he owes his services to the Duke because his lot has been cast so, and he must pay his dues, but after :

“ I'll tell you what I intend to do:
I must see this fellow his sad life through.”

Meanwhile he will dream, he says :

“ Under a hedge, like Orson the wood-knight,
Turn myself round and bid the world good-night;
To a world where's to be no further throwing,
Pearls before swine that can't value them. Amen!”

In the poem “ My Last Duchess ” the theme is again the tyranny of a man over a woman—the tyrannical suppression of one nature by another ; the jealous man who would control the smiles of his wife to himself alone—that imposition of tyranny on the soul which either makes it, as in “ The Little Duchess,” or breaks it, as in “ My Last Duchess.” The one soul found emancipation through imagination and spiritual uprush to a region where human tyranny is powerless to pain ; the other shrinks and dies, finding its release in death.

The poem “ My Last Duchess ” was first named “ Italy.” It is the story of the death of a first wife, and may or may not embody an emotion of the Browning family relating to the history of the treatment of the portrait of the poet's grandmother, which on his grandfather's second marriage was banished to an attic.

It is possible that indignation, one of the most powerful of the constructive emotions, may have bitten in the art of this work of Browning's. The story of his grandmother's banished portrait was matter of indignation to the family. At this time the families had no intercourse—there was bad feeling over the early differences of the father and

grandfather of the poet ; but as these were bridged in later life, the portrait of his mother was rescued by the father of the poet and given place of honour in his home.

From whatever emotion, however, the poem "My Last Duchess" is graved to supreme point of descriptive art.

The poem "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli" is a tale of crusading times—Rudel the Crusader, with his face to the East, in passion of longing to free the tomb of Christ, the objective of all good Christians in medieval times. His lady lives there like an angel. He is nourished by tradition of her ; he craves her approving glance : "One gold look across the waters to this twilight nook."

The lady was the Countess of Tripoli in this legend of Rudel the Crusader, who gave generous hospitality to the knights who travelled to the East with the purpose of freeing the Holy Sepulchre from the infidel in possession of it.

In the legend of Rudel of Tripoli, it is related that he fell ill and died, turning his dying gaze in love-longing to the East to the lady of his dreams, whom he sings his passion of service to :

" Say, men feed
On songs I sing, and therefore bask the bees
On my flower's breast as on a platform broad :
But, as the flower's concern is not for these
But solely for the sun, so men applaud
In vain this Rudel, he not looking here
But to the East—the East! Go, say this, Pilgrim dear!"

The poem "Count Gismond" tells a story whose action is at "Aix at Provence." It is related by a girl who was saved by Count Gismond from the lying imprecations cast upon her by Count Gauthier, whose advances she had repulsed. It is the story of a lie killed for defence of truth, and pity for the helpless girl branded by the lie : it displays one of those gusts of passion for truth that Browning's art knew so well how to handle. The poem was first called "France."

The girl tells the story of the coil of lies that the Count threw around her, the reason why he did so, and how all seemed lost under the lie of the Count, which she was helpless to fling back; her sufferings and love of her deliverer :

“ What says the body when they spring
Some monstrous torture-engine’s whole
Strength on it? No more says the soul.”

“ Till out strode Gismond . . .
He strode to Gauthier, in his throat
Gave him the lie, then struck his mouth
With one back-handed blow that wrote
In blood men’s verdict there. . . .
The lie was dead
And damned, and truth stood up instead.”

In the poem “A Glove” is recorded a memory of the poet’s boyhood. There was a lion in a menagerie which he loved to frequent as a child—the Royal Menagerie of Edward Cross, then a famous resort of amusement in London, and a place of instruction and wonder to children concerning foreign animals and birds. This story, “A Glove,” is that of the lady and the Cavalier of the Court of Francis I., who treated her lover’s devotion so coquettishly as to throw her glove into the arena, compelling him to brave the lion in order to recover it. The old legend relates that her lover recovered the glove, then, throwing it in her face, left her in scorn, all the lookers-on approving.

“ Not so I interpret her motive,” adds Browning; “I do not think it was coquetry that set the act, but pure desire to test the worth of the words of devotion of her lover ” :

“ As if she had tried in a crucible,
To what speeches like gold were reducible,
And finding the finest prove copper,
Felt the smoke in her face was but proper:
To find what she had not to trust to
Was worth all the ashes and dust too.”

The "Dramatic Lyrics" of 1842 were dedicated to John Kenyon, Miss Barrett's cousin, their friend and benefactor, their introducer and generous assister later.

The "Soliloquy of a Spanish Cloister" is an unpleasant episode of these times, as Ogniben, the Prelate of a "Soul's Tragedy," also presents that Jesuitical skill which can create a preliminary agreement, in order to the more completely crush the subject later.

In "The Laboratory" a picture is given of the elementary methods of Italy to get rid of obstructive lives by poison. It is a presentment of medieval life displaying practices in the struggle for existence in the past, doubtless true to facts as the poet had gleaned them during his visit to Italy, and in the reading of outstanding lives of Italy's past.

In the picture "Holy Cross Day" the tyranny of the early Church of Rome is presented : the tyranny that compelled the Jews to attend an annual Christian sermon in Rome to bring about their conversion.

Browning pictures the reluctant procession of the rebellious Jews—the unpleasing spectacle of Jews of all kinds and conditions dragged to the Christian service by the force of the law. It is a revolting spectacle, and, realistically presented, is specimen of artistry coarse and revolting to some, but it clothes the scene with its truth in appropriate language. In this picture of revolting tyranny of the medieval Church, is also dealt with, in adequate language, the lofty ineradicable faith of the Jew : that his destiny is noble, despite this contemptuous treatment of him, is presented nobly and adequately. This bad business, says Browning, was abolished by Sixtus V.

The poems bracketed together as "Camp and Cloister" in the third number of "Bells and Pomegranates" were later separated, the one appearing in the collected edition as "Incident of the French Camp," the other as "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister."

"Camp," or "Incident of the French Camp," may or

may not be founded on some legendary piece of heroism during the Napoleonic war when Ratisbon, an ancient city of Bavaria, fell to the bombardment of Napoleon's army.

This "Incident of the French Camp" is one of those episodes which Browning's ready Art ever sprang to embalm, whether legendary or created by himself—the heroic pride, the stoic suffering, the unconquerable soul of the youth; the tenderness of the conquering Napoleon for his men, his glory in their successes dimmed by sympathy in their suffering. As the Spartan youth related the success of the sieges:

“ The chief’s eye flashed ; his plans
Soared up again like fire— . . . but presently
Softened itself, as sheathes
A film the mother eagle’s eye
When her bruised eaglet breathes ;
‘ You’re wounded ! ’ ‘ Nay,’ the soldier’s pride
Touched to the quick, he said :
‘ I’m killed, Sire ! ’ And, his Chief beside,
Smiling the boy fell dead.”

The title "Cloister" (Spanish) of the third number of "Bells and Pomegranates" became in the collected edition the more definite one, "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister."

The picture is an unpleasant one of the hatred and jealousy of a small soul for a large one, the mean nature's vindictive lying utterances against a greater nature—a poem picturing that implacable wall of point of view between personalities of differing calibre.

In his malice, the low man rakes up shreds of gossip, spreads spiteful insinuations against the higher man : the inferior development burns with rage against the superior mind ; the one imputes to the other all the nastinesses and mortifications of his small, poor soul to the rich large nature of the other. The apparently insuperable barrier

of differing developments and points of view is the unpleasant stuff of the poem.

Many of the poems of the third and seventh number of "Bells and Pomegranates" were the result of Browning's visits to Italy.

Mr. Chesterton says that Browning was quite wrong in being despairing of the ways and methods of Italy from personal acquaintance with them :

"Really," he writes, "that country's reaction to ecclesiasticism was entirely noble in its instinct, for ceremonial religion has the virtue of reverence at its heart, whatever its ways and methods are. There is no doubt that Browning's avowed hatred of the Imperial and Ducal and Papal systems of Italy, which grew upon him as he lived among them, sometimes passed the bounds of his avowed Liberalism, and transgressed its spirit."—*Chesterton's Life of Browning*.

"We must never forget the Puritan in Browning," says Mr. Chesterton, for which reason he considers that Browning was quite unable historically to look upon such an event as the fall of Strafford. Mr. Chesterton digresses most illuminatingly upon his conception of the points that should have been made in connection with the fall of Strafford.

In the poem "Pippa Passes," too, Browning went wrong, says Mr. Chesterton : to have pictured Monsignor, the great Prelate, toying with suggestions, listening to a plot against the life and honour of the singer of Asolo, was simply, says Mr. Chesterton, to reduce the thing to Drury Lane melodrama. It was not well done, he says ; he could have written it better. Gigadibs, the journalistic interviewer of the great man of his day, was not right either : the young man called Gigadibs, described by Browning in contemptuous terms :

" You, Gigadibs, who, thirty years of age,
Write stately for Blackwood's Magazine,
Believe you see two points in Hamlet's soul
Unseized by the Germans yet—which view you'll
print—

Meantime the best you have to show being still
That lively lightsome article we took
Almost for the true Dickens."

This young man, says Mr. Chesterton, is a piece of pure bathos : he would not have written "Bishop Blougram's Apology," so Mr. Chesterton's "Biography of Browning," in the English Men of Letters Series, may supply a puzzle to posterity equalling that of the problem of the fly in the amber. He explains the puzzle, however, in one of those bright digressions which crowd his biography to the exclusion of the subject : his "Browning," he says delightedly, is like Sterne's "Tristram Shandy," the joke of which we must assume he has discovered and passes on with all the generosity of the discoverer : "A man," he writes, "who has missed the fact that the whole book is a game of digressions, a kind of practical joke to cheat the reader out of a story, has simply not read 'Tristram Shandy' at all."

And so diverting is Mr. Chesterton's similar treatment of the story of Browning, so amusing the digressions, that we forget to exclaim : "But why cheat his readers out of the story?" But so dazzling is his juggling, so fascinating is the jest and the gibe, so airy his spirit, so consummate the literary skill, so lightsome the touch, that he delights the man in the street—always keep your eye on the man in the street, advises Mr. Chesterton elsewhere. He can, or could, write spacious and great poetry, as his "Ballad of the White Horse" testifies : why he deserted the Muse for the Man in the Street is his own secret.

To a certain few it was uneasily felt from the first that, in his "Biography of Browning" for the English Men of Letters Series, Mr. Chesterton did not "play the game," either by his editors who paid him for the story of Browning, or his readers, and not for a series of digressions, turning the thing almost into a joke. Amusing and illuminating his digressions are, ranging through the length and breadth of the Irish question and Mr. Glad-

stone's Home Rule Bill (for opposition to which Browning paid the penalty, says Dr. Dowden). There is much gossip by the way—interesting gossip, it must be said; *e.g.*, the gossip of that day that Browning was supposed to be hostile to the Roman Catholic Church.

When Browning was told of this at that old-time dinner-party of Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, he was very much surprised, so the story goes, and on asking why, was answered with the cry, "Bishop Blougram's Apology." That he was in the black book of the Church for this had never entered his head, it seems.

Mr. Chesterton passes on the hoary jest and gibe at "Sordello" with infinite zest; also the view of Browning as a sensualist: "Fifine-at-the-Fair," "Bishop Blougram's Apology," "Hohenstiel-Schwangau," "Sludge, the Medium," he classes as the "knaves" of Browning. "Fifine-at-the-Fair" he asks his readers to regard as a piece of sexual dualism; but Professor Dowden interprets it as a long philosophical dissertation by Browning on the methods of his art, and Browning himself wrote of it to Domett as the most metaphysical thing he has written since "Sordello." With one "knaves" turning into a philosopher of compromise it may be expected that all are likely to do the same automatically.

But for compromise, says Mr. Chesterton in a cheerful digression, he has no sympathy. He says in digression from the subject of "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society," that, to his mind, there is nothing inspiring about the adventurer who merely preserves the existing order of things, but the adventurer who can destroy and re-create he can forgive and commend to the world, to stand; but there is something repugnant to the imagination, he thinks, in the rebel who rebels in the name of Compromise.

Mr. Chesterton imputes dark traits to Browning, and wonders naïvely what the Nonconformist conscience is

about not to have seen them too. He hints at defects of character too odious to be here passed on. He spits his great subject on the rapier of his wit, juggles with the central sanctity of his life, makes merry digression upon a woman's pet name—after her pathetic appeal to posterity to deal kindly with it too.

Browning's difficulty with language was so great, digresses Mr. Chesterton to say, that he couldn't compose even a telegram lucidly. At the same time, he was in his modesty a model for all men of letters, he declares; his humility with respect to his "*Sordello*," for instance, which to Mr. Chesterton is a thing of "indescribable density," was a model, for he wrote of it himself that he blamed no one for not understanding it, least of all himself; but, says Mr. Chesterton generously, all the same it was the most glorious compliment paid to the average man. A critic before him also was able to see that "a critic writing by the day or week might well like to dismiss '*Sordello*' with an angry word" (R. H. Horne, "*New Spirit of the Age*").

Indeed, says Mr. Chesterton in digression, a critic, with no little cultivation either, will, in speaking of a work of art, let fall almost accidentally some trivial comment which reveals the fact that he does not, so far as that work of art is concerned, in the smallest degree understand what he is talking about.

Browning's faith in his work, however, was quite right, Mr. Chesterton thinks; he was quite right, he says, "in believing each one of us should be the messenger of a peculiar confidence from God, each one of us the founder of a religion of which our bodies, our habits, our boots, our tastes, our virtues and even our vices are more or less fragmentary expressions."

Sir Frank Marzials, in his little volume in the Miniature Series of Great Writers, says: "Mr. Chesterton may be read with great interest and profit by those who are in a position to control their author."

That Mr. Chesterton did not play the game either by his editors or the public in his portraiture of Browning is uneasily felt in certain quarters: that at times his pen turned to a bludgeon in his hand is an old standing joke upon it, which time does not dispel.

CHAPTER IX

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN ROBERT BROWNING AND ELIZABETH BARRETT

Refusal of poetess to make poet's acquaintance—She saw no visitors—Her family regarded her as dying woman—Correspondence of four months before personal interview granted—Personal confessions.

THE year 1845 was dead slack of fortune's tide with Browning. He had grown tired of the whip-lash of the critic curling about his shoulders ; a very blight seemed to have fallen upon his first few admirers ; friends had fallen away ; his dream of impressing himself upon mankind by means of the stage had fallen in ruin at his feet.

At this time the family were installed at New Cross ; it is this home and garden the letters describe.

In the correspondence with Miss Barrett (1845-46), Browning, the man, emerges ; he confided to his "new strange friend" how he would fain be done with England and go to his heart in Italy. He does not now expect the fixed stars before his time ; he confesses his resources of soul, and how he comforts himself under public disregard of his work. We are told of the secret of his fortitude and patience, under the lash of criticism which enabled him to live cheerfully under circumstances so chilling and apparently futile. We hear him confessing that he was shaping his life to be a poet, if not *the* poet : he declares he can wait three hundred years for his reward.

In these letters he avowed his high aims, displayed his clear consciousness of his worth to God and man ; also his despair of ever being able to give his light directly to the world, without dramatic veil of some other human story to build upon. He could only make men and women speak

the truth for him, he declared, and feared the light within himself.

He asserts in his letters, as in his poems, that he has a secret ; he leaves it to his correspondent's intuition as he does to his readers, to divine it. He had a few fire-eyes, he declared, but great waste tracts between. The fire-eyes were tending to extinction and the ice between was encroaching, yet the valleys between his Vesuvius eruptions were equally characteristic, he asserted, and the apparently waste land probably the best part of him.

Miss Barrett has left record in a letter to Miss Mitford of her delight in the reception of her first letter from the poet : " I had a letter from Browning the poet last night ; Browning, the author of ' Paracelsus ' and ' King of the Mystics.' " With Elizabeth Barrett in this year 1845 fortune and success in literature had arrived. She had an assured position with the reading public in England and America ; her publisher's report was that her books " went steadily off." Edgar Allan Poe had just dedicated his volume of poems to her.

In his appreciation of Miss Barrett in his book " The New Spirit of the Age," Mr. Horne describes her prominent characteristic as

" the struggles of a soul towards heaven—all wings, rich in imagination and ethereal aspirations whose individuality is cast upwards in the divine afflatus. Probably no living individual has a more extensive and diffuse acquaintance with literature—that of the present day inclusive. Although she has read Plato in the original, from beginning to end, and the Hebrew Bible from Genesis to Malachi (nor suffered her course to be stopped by the Chaldean), yet there is probably not a single good romance of the most romantic kind in whose marvellous and impossible scenes she has not delighted, over the fortunes of whose immaculate or incredible heroes she has not wept."

" There is no doubt she wrote much of the book ' The New Spirit of the Age,' " says Walter Jerrold in his introduction to it, " but she did not wish her name to be

identified with it." "It is a service of danger to write in the book," she explained, "and I who am a woman am not made for war."

To this book Browning and Miss Barrett were both contributing, unknown to each other. Mottoes were prefixed to the various essays, "for the most part supplied by Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, who were at that time unknown to each other."

In these letters of 1845-46 the poet discussed his art and hers, satisfied her curiosity about his feelings under criticism. He declares that he writes from a thorough conviction that it is the duty of him, and with the belief, that after every drawback and shortcoming he was doing his best—"that is, for *me*"—and so being not listened to by one human creature would in no wise affect him. He did not now go about wanting the fixed stars before his time, and was very grateful to this new friend who had taken away his reproach from among men, "who have each and all their friend, they say."

"I have my own soul and my own secret delights. I shall not go die in Rome or take to gin and the newspapers. I fear God and am ready, he knows, to die this moment . . . meaning on the whole to be a poet if not *the Poet*—for I am vain and ambitious some nights. Such a bird as my black self that goes screeching about the world for dead horse, I, too, who have been at such pains to acquire the reputation I enjoy in the world, and who dine and wine and dance and enhance the company's pleasure till they make me ill and keep house as of late. Mr. Kenyon says my common sense strikes him, and its contrast with my muddy metaphysical poetry. My own way of worldly life is marked out long ago, as precisely as yours can be, and I am not going with a hand winker-wise on each side of my head and a directing finger before my eyes, to say nothing of an instinctive dread I have that a certain whip-lash is vibrating somewhere in the neighbourhood in playful readiness. What I have printed," confides Browning, "gives no knowledge of me . . . these scenes and song scraps *are* such mere and very escapes of my inner power, which lives in me like the light in those crazy Mediterranean pharos I have watched at sea, wherein the light is ever revolv-

ing in a dark gallery, bright and alive, and only after a weary interval leaps out, for a moment, from the one narrow chink, and then goes on with the blind wall between it and you; and no doubt, *then* precisely, does the poor drudge that carries the cresset set himself most busily to trim the wick—for don't think I want to say I have not worked hard (this head of mine knows better)—but the work has been *inside*, and not when at stated times I held up any light to you. The more one sits and thinks over the creative process, the more it confirms itself as inspiration, nothing more nor less. Or at worst you write down old inspirations, what you remember of them . . . but with *that* it begins. Reflexion is exactly what it names itself—a representation in scattered rays from every angle of incidence, *of what first of all became present in a great light, a whole one.* So tell me how these lights are born if you can."

"Subtleties of thought," writes Miss Barrett, discussing his poem "The Lost Mistress," "which are not directly apprehensible to minds of common range, are here as elsewhere in your writings; but if to utter things hard to understand from that cause of offence, why we may begin with 'Our beloved brother Paul.'"

"Genius precedes, initiates," she is of opinion; "it is genius which gives an age its character and imposes its own colour. You are above all these clouds—your element is otherwise. Men are not your taskmasters that you should turn to them for recompense. As for your poetry, I believe in it as golden water. All men can teach at second or third hand, as you say, by prompting the foremost rows—all except poets, who must preach their own doctrine and sing their own song to be the means of any wisdom or any music, and have stricter duties laid upon them. It would be a curious and instructive process," Miss Barrett thinks, "to collect the critical opinion of every age touching its own literature. Shakespeare's age was considered quite unilluminated to Sir Philip Sidney—the denial of contemporary genius is the rule rather than the exception of the great body of critics. You observe rightly, that they are better than might be expected of their badness. The brazen kettles will be taken for oracles all the world over."

"I have no pleasure in writing—none in the mere act," he confides. "I think you like the operation of writing, as I should like that of painting or making music. After all, there is a great delight in the *heart of the thing*, and use and forethought have made me ready at all times to set to work."

Why not come down to your public? she remonstrates. Why not explain more? Vasari, she reminds him, is not the textbook of the world. He replies with Goethe's advice about meeting questioners :

“ Be it your unerring rule
Ne'er to contradict a fool,
For if folly choose to brave you
All your wisdom cannot save you ”;

and he himself helps out the questioners in Jesuit Ogniben fashion. Sometimes, he asserts, “ it all seems so wearisomely unprofitable, what comes of Smith's second thought if you change the first—out of that will branch as great an error, you may be sure.”

The reviews of the time exasperate Miss Barrett :

“ So genius is to renounce itself,” she writes—“ what atheists these critics are, after all, and how the old heathens understood the divinity of gifts. The world should know the truth ; it is easier to find a more faultless writer than a poet of equal genius.” “ For my part,” wrote Miss Barrett in another letter, “ I would rather fall into the hands of God than man.”

“ You have helped me to cover a defeat,” he writes. “ I sincerely hope and trust to show my gratitude for what is promised my future life by doing some real work in it, work of yours as through you. . . . On a kind of principle I have tried before this to subdue the expression of gratitude for the material worldly good you do me. It is the simple truth that you have been helping me to cover a defeat, not gain a triumph. . . . Whatever love of mine clings to you was created by you,—they were not in me, I believe, those feelings, till you came. God bless you, as I say it no vain word,—If you will not believe in the immortality of love, do think the poor thought that when love shall end, gratitude will begin.”

He writes that his whole scheme of life (with its material wants, at least, closely cut down) was long ago calculated. In calculating one goes on chances, not on Providence. For his future wants he had always refused to care, he wrote. He had lived for a couple of years or more on bread and potatoes once, and preferred a blouse and blue

shirt to all manner of dress and gentlemanly appointments, and he could groom his own horse, and would rather live like this than succeed in law (then under consideration as more remunerative than poetry).

But meeting her, all changes, he wrote : he will cease considering the lilies how they grow, he will do all that can be done to earn money for the life in contemplation with her.

"The fact is," he writes, "not having really cared about anything except not losing too much money, I have taken very little care of my concerns in that way . . . not calling on Moxon for months together. But all will be different now, and I shall look into matters and turn my experience to account, such as it is."

"Whenever I make up my mind to that, I feel I can be rich enough and to spare, because along with what you have called genius in me, is certainly talent, what the world recognises as such, and I have tried it in various ways, just to be sure that I was a little magnanimous in never intending to use it. Thus in more than one of the reviews and newspapers that laughed my 'Paracelsus' to scorn ten years ago—in the same column often of these reviews would follow a most laudatory notice of an Elementary French book on a new plan, which I 'did' for my old French Master and published—'that was really a useful work'! So that when the only obstacle is only that there is so much per annum to be produced, you will tell me . . . I desire in this life (with very little fluctuation for a man and too weak a one) to live and just write out certain things which are in me, and so save my soul."

But "all men ought to be independent," he writes, "and so, too, I like being alone myself. . . . I suppose I understand Goethe's meaning when he says every man has liberty enough, political liberty and social. So that when they let him write 'Faust' after his own fashion, he does not mind how they dispose of his money."

He despairs of ever being able to communicate the depths of his soul to anyone, even to her. He regrets this deep secretiveness of his, but emotions that transcend the common experience cannot be presented to it except in hints and flashes; if a soul shows but one point of superiority over the common taste, ridicule falls. He

could only make men and women speak, and present through them a light which he believed he possessed : to keep this light of his at work, and to present, from every angle of incidence, the Light which, he confided, broke upon him as a whole one, was his life's task.

It is only when he is pained, so he writes, that he can disclose himself freely. Under raptures he is cold, uncommunicative as a stone : under joy he is silent, but when pained he must write it out *most*.

The finger of God is veritably the source of his power, he believes ; the Hand at his shoulder a felt guidance. The quarter of an hour or so of inspiration, he confesses, is rapture ; the writing of it out, pure drudgery. He had acquired the reputation of being dramatic, partly due to his own fault. He sinned in respect to light words about his true work, he records with regret : the poet can but run his own metal into his moulds, he confesses—must relate his own soul to his puppets.

He regrets his deep secretiveness, the mask grows irksome ; he will throw it off at her bidding and speak directly for once as she does. Mankind would know him better in time, but for the present he is helpless against misjudgment and misrepresentation : “Against pure lying,” he writes, “a man has no defence.” It is a bleak business, this talking to the wind, he confesses, but the not being listened to does not affect his work in the least ; certainly he will not walk with a hand winker-wise to please the minds that are in power, that Keats should go despairing to die in Rome, and Tennyson go softly all his days with one eye on the reviews he could not understand. “Critics ! Hucksters !” he writes indignantly. “I have my own soul, my own delights. I shall not go die in Rome or take to gin or the newspapers, nor yet lay my sources of strength open to anybody.” He makes a habit of dining and wining and dancing ; goes into society, this year of 1845, lest some unknown good may escape him by his not doing so. He must know all there is to know of

this year 1845, he writes. He mixes with people for his own ends of knowledge, and he does not take the attitude of being a piece of neglected merit. He wishes the public had bought his poems for his father's sake, and he, too, would have had a little to spend. But if it would not! Nor even praise! Then let them decamp to the crows, and leave him to his garden and his soul. His father and mother would have been proud if he had found success; their pleasure would have pleased him, and for that he would have been grateful. He has even lost taste for reading at this period, he asserts, and even the picture of his beloved Andromeda fails to fire his imagination as it used to.

And does this receiving of him tire her? he writes. Does he talk too loud?—it is a habit of his, bred of having had to talk to deaf people. He writes of his friends—of dear Carlyle; of Tennyson, whom he only knows by sight; Wordsworth, who is kind to him; and Landor, who alone recognised him.

In 1845 Landor realised Browning's genius, and told the world so in a sonnet, and in a letter to him wrote : “ You may stand quite alone, and *I think you will.*”

He writes of visits to Carlyle :

“ I went to Chelsea and found dear Carlyle alone—his wife is in the country, where he will join her as soon as his book's last sheet returns corrected and fit for the press—which will be at the month's end about. He was all kindness and talked like his own self while he made me tea—and, afterward, brought chairs into the little yard, rather than garden, and smoked his pipe with apparent relish; at night he would walk as far as Vauxhall Bridge on my way home.” “ I have been reading and admiring these letters of Mr. Carlyle,” writes Miss Barrett, “ . . . and what his appreciation of you is, it is easy to see—and what he expects from you—notwithstanding that prodigious advice of his, to write your next work in prose !”

The reception of his poem “ Paracelsus ” is told to Miss Barrett during their correspondence. I know that

until Forster's notice in the *Examiner* appeared, every journal that thought worth while to allude to the poem at all, treated it with entire contempt, beginning, I think, with the *Athenæum*, which then made haste to say, a few days after its publication, that it was not without talent, but spoiled by obscurity and only an imitation of Shelley. He had loved the prolonged relation of childhood with his parents, he confided. He had never calculated upon changing it. Marriage had never seemed probable for him, because on chance one can calculate, but he had never deemed the finding of her likely; she was, in his opinion, the direct gift of Providence to him. At thirty-three he was confronted with an idea he had believed to be far remote, if ever probable, and the startling fact was upon him that the responsibility of maintaining a home of his own faced him. It was again upon the generous father he would have to draw for means for his marriage, he said; for, urgent as the necessity for secrecy was, he had not wounded the good father and gentle mother by withholding his confidence from them concerning their acquaintance and engagement.

So little had his poems brought him that he could not calculate upon even fifty pounds a year from them—fifty or sixty horrible pounds a year, upon which one lives famously at Ravenna, he wrote grimly; for the fact that his marriage was only possible because Miss Barrett had an income of her own hurt him greatly. There was much writing to and fro between New Cross and Wimpole Street as to the safeguarding of her money; with quixotic pride Browning insisted upon a deed being drawn up by which the money was to revert to her sisters at her death.

At this time there is a discussion *re* changing unremunerative poetry, making for the practice of the law; but Miss Barrett would hear of no law project. He also tells her that he could get five hundred pounds for a novel on Napoleon III. All was in discussion, when fate forced

the hands of the lovers, and the hurried marriage and departure were planned and decisively carried through.

The desolation of that apparently abortive time of early middle life was dispelled by his marriage; turning from scenes of discomfiture and disappointment, he made Italy his home for fifteen years, with the woman who enabled him to write exultingly :

“ God be thanked, the meanest of his creatures
Boasts two soul sides, one to face the world with,
One to show a woman when he loves her.”

CHAPTER X

PERSONAL RELATIONS ESTABLISHED BETWEEN ROBERT BROWNING AND ELIZABETH BARRETT

Poet proposes marriage at second meeting—Rejected—Bidden forget the incident—Miss Barrett's family circumstances—Father allows no lovers to any of his children—Second proposal of the poet—Engagement consented to—Family history related by Miss Barrett.

ELIZABETH BARRETT MOULTON BARRETT was the eldest child of Edward Moulton Barrett. When she was born he was a man of wealth, derived from West Indian property. The abolition of slavery reduced it in later life to an income of sufficient but not ample means for the needs of his large family.

Elizabeth Barrett was born at Coxhoe Hall, Durham, on March 6th, 1809, the residence of one of Mr. Barrett's brothers, whose house was occupied pending the building of one to Mr. Barrett's own plans. This was of Oriental design, erected regardless of expense, of great magnificence, called Hope End; but as income became curtailed the family moved to a smaller establishment at Sidmouth, Devonshire.

From here, after three years of unsettled life, the family moved to London to a furnished house—74, Gloucester Place—by which time Mr. Barrett was a widower.

Her mother is described by Miss Barrett as “a vague anxious figure, a sweet gentle nature which the thunder turned a little from its sweetness . . . one of those women who can never resist . . . too womanly, she was . . . it was her only fault.”

The gentle, unresisting mother faded out of life in 1828, after bearing a family of eleven children.

It was through her elderly cousin, John Kenyon, who lived near by in Gloucester Place, that Miss Barrett met literary London. This kind cousin Kenyon was also a man of independent means derived from West Indian property. He was a man of fifty at this time, a widower, of a calm temperament, described by Miss Barrett in a letter to Miss Mitford as having "rather the solemnity and calmness of *truth* itself than the animation and energy of those who seek for it."

In 1838 the family moved to 50, Wimpole Street, and from thence onward Miss Barrett's health declined rapidly to that of the complete invalid she described herself to be in her early letters to Browning.

➤ Her delicate health had always made hers a position of tender regard to her father. He was proud of the "poet at his knee," and encouraged her poetical gifts and ambitions. At the age of fourteen she had composed the "Epic on Marathon," and was meditating the "Essay on Mind."

The family life of Miss Barrett was that of old-fashioned parental tyranny. Mr. Barrett had a hard, jealous, violent temper, almost amounting to insanity in its violent outbursts. He had a patriarchal view with respect to the obedience of children—the family lived in veriest slavery to the father's commands: "We are reduced to the vices of slaves," Miss Barrett wrote, when circumstances compelled candour to her correspondent. She had but "the freedom of the four walls of home," she wrote. She was in measurable reach of the grave, she believed, but she had the solace of deep study and the imaginative gift, the valiant spirit and responsive soul, and early found her comfort in literature, and dreamed her dream of joining the ranks of poets, the "solemnised and crowned."

It was not until she was about thirty years of age that her girlish delicacy took the alarming nature of nervous

prostration and weakness of the lung : her nervous system, she wrote, was completely shattered. She was ordered forty drops of laudanum a day. The cold weather acted on the lung, she wrote, and the necessary shutting up in winter reacted on the nerves, “and thus, without any mortal disease, I am thrown out of life, out of the ordinary sphere of enjoyment and activity, and made a burden to myself and others.”

It was while at Torquay endeavouring to weather the English winter of 1840 that the tragedy occurred which reduced her to the grave’s edge. Her favourite brother, Edward, whose studies she had shared, had stayed down with her in defiance of their father’s command. She wrote of this illness that she was so ill as to make it seem impossible she could ever be better. Her brother stayed to help her through it, and one day was drowned while yachting with two companions.

Under this blow Miss Barrett succumbed almost to insanity, it seemed to her, she wrote afterwards. She remained for months at Torquay, and after returning to Wimpole Street became the suffering recluse of letters, the religious hermit of some descriptions, the dying woman everyone believed her to be. At the Gloucester Street home she had been sought as a literary luminary, but, owing to health, responded sparingly to invitations. Miss Mitford was one of these new friends—their literary tastes cemented the friendship to intimacy. Miss Mitford described Elizabeth Barrett at this time as the most interesting person she had ever met : her shower of dark curls, her expressive face, her large, tender eyes richly fringed by dark eyelashes, a smile like a sunbeam—such a look of youthfulness that it was difficult to believe she could be the translator of Æschylus and author of an “Essay on Mind.”

During the five years succeeding the move to Wimpole Street, Elizabeth Barrett never left home. She lay in pain and sorrowing memory alone. She saw but kind Cousin

Kenyon and Miss Mitford. She accepted the lot of one in the shadow of death, with youth and health gone, but with literary reputation and poetical fame rising to place her a star in public opinion. She wrote at this time of Browning, whose poetry she admired, that she had never seen him, but from the mystery of poetic fellow-feeling, she was very sensitive to the thousand and one stripes laid upon him by the critics.

Such was the situation when the correspondence began between them.

So frail in body, Elizabeth Barrett had a soul tumultuous and daring. She wrote her passionate protest against the grinding slavery the young lives of the little children of England were subjected to in mine and factory, and it was her hand, so "spirit small," which helped to open the path of literary freedom for women; her passionate spirit demanded to be allowed to step out into the Infinite, if so it lay within her, in a sonnet which foreshadowed the genius to come.

In her second letter of the now famous correspondence she relates an opinion of her as *testa longa*, and though she had had enough to tame her, and might be expected to stand still in her stall, she was still headlong, precipitate, rushing through nettles and briars, instead of keeping the path, guessing at words she did not know, tearing open letters and parcels, and "expecting everything to be done in a minute, and the thunder to be as quick as lightning."

She had learning rare in her day, and was a sound Greek scholar. The correspondence produces pitfalls for the unlearned by quotations and ellipsis, and allusions to a common stock of literary knowledge between the poets, and the habit of rushing into "one word more," upon a subject discussed on the visit, was added to the cryptic classical allusions.

A still renunciation of life was her attitude of body and mind when Robert Browning was bidden, after much hesitation, to make her acquaintance face to face; it was

love for him that lifted her from her couch and led her back to life :

“ I yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange
My near sweet view of Heaven for earth and thee. ”

In 1844 Miss Barrett published a collection of poems. One poem, called “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” pictured two lovers reading poetry together—Spencer, Petrarch :

“ Or at times a modern volume,—Wordsworth’s solemn-thoughted idyll,
Howitt’s ballad-dew, or Tennyson’s enchanted reverie—
Or from Browning some ‘Pomegranate,’ which, if cut
deep down the middle,
Shows a heart within blood, tinctured of a veined
humanity.”

When Browning read these lines he consulted Mr. Kenyon, who was a friend of his, as to the propriety of writing to Miss Barrett to acknowledge her gracious recognition of him. Mr. Kenyon thought he might write, and, on January 10th, 1845, their correspondence began.

We are not treading profanely in gleaning their story from these letters. Browning himself placed them in his son’s hands with the words, “There, take them and do what you like with them after I am dead and gone,” knowing and intending their publication to throw light and truth upon their lives.

The poet’s first letter was a tumultuous expression of appreciation of Miss Barrett’s work : “I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett. . . . I would this once get out of my habit of purely passive enjoyment, when I really do enjoy. . . .” He tells her of how he nearly met her once ; he expected to meet her, but it turned out she was too unwell to be presented to strangers. He describes how he felt, as if he “had been so close to some world’s wonder in chapel or crypt, only a screen to push and I might have entered, and the sight was never to see.”

After an interchange of letters he writes asking her personal acquaintance.

Miss Barrett resists the proposal. She was so delicate, she wrote. [She appreciated her new friend's wish to see her—he was Paracelsus and she a recluse with broken nerves. [He was for feasting and sunshine, she for sorrow, unfit for strong emotion]—and scarcely to be called young. She never saw visitors, except kind Cousin Kenyon and Miss Mitford.

[For four months correspondence passed between the poets before Miss Barrett could consent to a personal acquaintance.]

On May 16th she writes in disgust of herself over the "piece of work" she has made of the question.

"I am shy by nature," she wrote—"my nerves are shaken. Come if you care to." But he must not talk of having seen her, because visitors in a general way are impossible. She is ashamed of having made so much fuss—he is extravagant about caring for what will be nothing to him afterwards. She will see him any day between two and six. She knows she has appeared ungrateful—there was nothing to see in her. Her sister will bring him upstairs when he calls, and he must be indulgent and like her as well as he can.

He thanks her for the permission to call—her infinite kindness in consenting. At two on Tuesday. He has acquaintances thick in the vicinity, and should she not feel well enough to see him, he could call again; as a fact, his time is of no importance.

On Miss Barrett's letter of reply to this is the note :
" May 20th, 1845, 3-4½ P.M."

His letter to her of May 21st is full of anxious queries : Was she tired? Did he do wrong in anything? Or, if you please, right in anything? Did he speak too loudly? He has a deaf old relative, and is told he speaks in that loud way now by habit. And did he stay too long? And how happy he feels in this new friendship—"and may God bless you!"

On the following Tuesday another meeting took place.

In sudden swirl of emotion he offered her his lifelong devotion. A letter followed immediately, confirming his passionate declaration of love, reaffirming his desire to take her life into his keeping.]

Miss Barrett was startled and shocked ; she was entirely unprepared for such a storm of feeling. The result was apparently disastrous. His letter was returned, he was bidden to destroy it, commanded to forget his torrent of wild words.

In later months she asked to have this letter returned to her. " Could you think," he answered, " it existed one *moment* after its return so? It was burned, and I cried, Serve it right."

This letter must be dropped as a misprint would be, she wrote. There must be no more wild speaking, no more intemperate words ; such fancies are never to be alluded to : this is a condition imperative to their future acquaintance. She begs him remember her exceptional position, which alone makes it possible for her to receive him. Should he revive the subject, she could not—would not—see him again, and for her sake he must observe this. She has so much pleasure in their meetings, she appreciates so all his gifts of thinking and teaching—it is her own praise that she can appreciate him.

He replies in desperate sorrow for his inconsiderate outburst—he who would rather soften and sleeken like a bird before her.

So the matter drops, and he is bidden to call next Tuesday. Miss Barrett was thirty-nine years of age, but these visits had to be kept secret from her father. He was autocratic, violent tempered, had patriarchal ideas of the family life ; he demanded abject submission from sons and daughters ; he allowed no mention of their ever leaving him to be made, permitted no lovers ; it was understood that a child who married would be cast off for ever. No visitor came but by his permission, and brothers

and sisters had connived to keep the knowledge that their sister upstairs had this weekly visitor.

Miss Barrett had to enlighten this visitor as to the need for caution with respect to her father, but her brothers and sisters were glad of his visits if it made their dear "Ba" happy—secrecy must be observed with respect to her father only.

There would be *no* getting over her father, she wrote—as well think to sweep the stars from Heaven with your eyelashes.

She attempts to explain and justify this attitude of her father's as a truly affectionate desire for his family's welfare. His was a loyal and pure nature, she wrote, which drew her reverence—the evil lay in the system.

Brothers and sisters were made aware of the visits, and were glad to help the lovers.

"If you came here every day," writes Miss Barrett, "my brothers and sisters would simply care to know if I liked it, and then be glad if I was glad—the caution referred to one alone. In relation to whom, however, there will be no 'getting over.' . . . But though I have been a submissive daughter, and this from no effort, but for love's sake . . . because I loved him tenderly (and love him) . . . yet I have reserved for myself always that right over my own affections, which is the most strictly personal of all things."

The character of Mr. Barrett was early disclosed to her lover by Miss Barrett, and these lovers, mature in age as they were, were to bitterly find that love for them would mean a thorny path. The daughter, loving as she is, writes sadly of the slavish obedience exacted of her and the other members of the family. Mr. Barrett was a father with a despotic will, a jealous temper, and an overbearing temperament that would allow his family no liberty. They were forced into concealment, into cowardice, into the "vices of slaves," "constrained bodily into submission" by the "inflexible will" of the father. He was, writes his daughter, full of

"deep and tender affection behind and below all those patriarchal ideas of governing grown-up children 'in the way they must go,' and there never was (under a strata) a truer affection in a father's heart . . . no, nor a worthier heart in itself . . . a heart loyaller and purer and more compelling to gratitude and reverence, than his, as I see it! The evil is in the system—and he simply takes it to be his duty to rule, and to make happy according to his own views of the propriety of happiness—he takes it to be his duty to rule like the King of Christendom, by divine right. But he loves us through and through, and I for one love him."

Miss Barrett was of mature age, and possessed an income which made her independent of her father, but she yielded the point of liberty, although to do so seemed a sacrifice of health, perhaps life, under the severe strain of the winter. Her "unforbidden country" lay within the four walls of home, and there was no alternative but to be cheerful and hope for a mild winter.

" You may be quite sure that I shall be well this winter, if in any way it should be possible, and that I *will not* be beaten down, if the will can do anything. I admire how, if all had happened so but a year ago (yet it could not have happened quite so), I should certainly have been beaten down—and how it is different now . . . and how it is only gratitude to you, to say that it is different now. My cage is not worse but better since you brought the green groundsel to it—and to dash oneself against the wires of it will not open the door. We shall see—and God will oversee."

Browning confides to his new friend that he never looks at books he loved once, that he is fast forgetting his Greek, and that much as he goes into society he hates it—has only put up with it these six or seven years past, lest by forgoing it some unknown good should escape him, and

" now that I have done most of what is to be done, any lodge in a garden of cucumbers for me! I don't even care about reading now—the world and pictures of it, rather than writings about the world! But you must read books in order to get words and forms for 'the public' if you *write*, and *that* you needs must do, if you fear God. I have no pleasure in writing myself—none in the mere act—though all pleasure in

the sense of fulfilling a duty, whence if I have done my real best, judge how heart-breaking a matter must it be to be pronounced a poor creature by critic this and acquaintance the other. But I think you like the operation of writing, as I should that of painting or making music, do you not? After all, there is a great delight in the *heart of the thing*; and use and forethought have made me ready at all times to set to work—but—I don't know why—my heart sinks whenever I open this desk; and rises when I shut it. Yet but for what I have written you would never have heard of me—and through what you have written, not properly for it, I love and wish you well!"

So Browning divined the love of writing in Miss Barrett, which was to make of the melodies of love heard, those melodies of sweetness which poets know how to fashion and embalm:

" Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on."

KEATS: *Ode to a Grecian Urn.*

Miss Barrett, out of her poet heart, was lifting their love story into the general heart of man in the high keeping of the sonnet:

1 " Yet love, mere love, is beautiful indeed
And worthy of acceptance. Fire is bright,
Let temple burn, or flax; an equal light
Leaps in the flame from cedar plank or weed:
And love is fire. And when I say at need
I love thee . . . mark! . . . I love thee—in thy sight
I stand transfigured, glorified aright,
With conscience of the new rays that proceed
Out of my face toward thine. There's nothing low
In love, when love the lowest: meanest creatures
Who love God, God accepts while loving so.
And what I *feel*, across the inferior features
Of what I *am*, doth flash itself, and show
How that great work of Love enhances Nature's."

Sonnet X.

2 " If thou must love me, let it be for naught
Except for love's sake only. Do not say,
' I love her for her smile—her look—her way'



Of speaking gently,—for a trick of thought
 That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
 A sense of pleasant ease on such a day.—
 For these things in themselves, beloved, may
 Be changed, or change for thee, and love, so wrought,
 May be unwrought so. Neither love me for
 Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry,—
 A creature might forget to weep, who bore
 Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!
 But love me for love's sake, that evermore
 Thou mayest love on, through love's eternity.”

Sonnet XIV.

“ Say over again, and yet once over again,
 That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated
 Should seem ‘ a cuckoo song ’ as thou dost treat it,
 Remember, never to the hill or plain,
 Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain
 Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.
 Belovèd, I, amid the darkness greeted
 By a doubtful spirit-voice, in that doubts pain,
 Cry, ‘ Speak once more—thou lovest ! ’ Who can fear
 Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll,
 Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?
 Say thou dost love me, love me, love me—toll
 The silver iterance!—only minding, dear,
 To love me also in silence with thy soul.”

Sonnet XXI.

“ I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
 I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
 I love thee with the passion put to use
 In my old griefs, and with my childhood’s faith
 I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
 With my lost saints—I love thee with the breath,
 Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
 I shall but love thee better after death.”

Sonnet XLIII.

The poetess writes to the poet with admiration for his poetry, and assures him that he has “ thrown out fragments of *os* sublime . . . indicating soul mammothism, that he has a great range from the faint high note of the mystics which are beyond personality to dramatic impersonations gruff with nature.” She agrees with all he

says about the critics, and the right attitude towards criticism :

" I have sometimes thought that it would be a curious and instructive process, as illustrative of the wisdom and apprehensiveness of critics, if anyone would collect the critical soliloquies of every age touching its own literature (as far as such may be extant), and compare them with the literary product of the said ages. . . . As far as I remember, he [Sir Philip Sidney] saw even Shakespeare indifferently. Oh, it was in his eyes quite an unillumined age, that period of Elizabeth which *we* see full of suns ! and few can see what is close to their eyes though they run their heads against it ; the denial of contemporary genius is the rule rather than the exception. No one counts the eagles in the nest till there is a rush of wings ; and lo ! they are flown. . . . Of the great body of critics you observe rightly, that they are better than might be expected of their badness, only the fact of their *influence* is no less undeniable than the reasons why they should not be influential. The brazen kettles will be taken for oracles all the world over."

In gratitude for this new friend the poet writes of his love. The poetess puts all the humility of love into the sonnet—

" Unlike are we, unlike, O princely heart !
Unlike our uses and our destinies.
Our ministering two angels look surprise
On one another, as they strike athwart
Their wings in passing. Thou, bethink thee, art
A guest for queens to social pageantries,
With gages from a hundred brighter eyes
Than tears even can make mine, to play thy part
Of chief musician. What hast *thou* to do
With looking from the lattice-lights at me,
A poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through
The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree ?
The chrism is on thine head—on mine, the dew,—
And Death must dig the level where these agree."

Sonnet III.

Letters of casual nature pass. Her new visitor is instructed as to which sister is Henrietta, the elder, and "the one who brought you into this room first," and which is Arabel,

" who is perhaps—perhaps—is my favourite—though my heart smites me while I write that unlawful word. They are both affectionate and kind to me in all things, and good and lovable in their own beings—very unlike for the rest; one, most caring for the Polka—and the other for the sermon preached in Paddington Chapel—that is Arabel."

A number of letters refer to visits arranged for, visits postponed. Miss Barrett can bear so little excitement, and the visits must remain an absolute secret even from Mr. Kenyon. But in a few months he has to be taken into their confidence, for, she writes : " He looks at me with such scanning spectacles, talks of it being a mystery to him how the poet found his way to Wimpole Street "; and although she can bespeak self-command, she has no presence of mind, and " he says you deserve to be a poet—being one in heart and life."

So the visits are confessed as generally once a week, for fear he should hear of them from other quarters.

From May to August there is a trustful drifting with the stream. Visits and letters concern themselves with the surface things of personality, with public questions, with poetical emotions, with confessions of their Art, with their previous meeting—a headlong rushing into reply of something discussed which breaks the correspondence from outside comprehension. " My letters seem naturally to answer any strong point brought out in the previous afternoon's discourse and not then disposed of . . . the vile fashion of a disputatious ' last word '—one word yet," he writes towards the end of the correspondence.

In one long sad afternoon's talk the tyranny of the home circumstances is revealed, and how the situation galled and chafed the delicate woman past endurance. The cloud charged with thunder and lightning always hanging over the household—how could she make her visitor understand the family slavery, the violence of her father towards wooers of his daughters?

One day in August the pent-up trouble was revealed, the intolerable temper of her father made known ; but

directly the sustaining presence of this sympathetic friend is withdrawn she repents her disclosures, and a letter is hastily written and dispatched, begging him to forget her outpouring, to place her trouble at its right source, to lay it all to broken nerves left by years of ill-health and consuming grief left by the death of her brother by drowning. She relates this tragedy as it occurred ; she could speak of it to no one else, and he is bidden to forget her lapse of control and never mention that subject of conversation again.

The man is baffled ; he longs to take this broken life into his keeping ; he has been bidden never to make mention of his love again, and is in honour bound to observe the command. His loyalty to this confuses the correspondence ; he hesitates ; two days pass without a letter.

Miss Barrett cannot rest. What is the matter ? she writes. Was he vexed ? Was he not well ? Would he send her just a line to relieve her anxiety, which was torturing her ?

At her appeal he replies renewing his previous offer of lifelong devotion to her—her command must be broken now that he knows her circumstances ; he must be allowed to say again—"this only once"—that he had offered her heart and soul and life wholly independent of any return on her part, and now did so again. He was at its lowest valuation supremely grateful to her for helping him to cover the crushing defeat of his ambitions at that time :

" How shall I deserve or be grateful enough to this new strange friend of my own, that has taken away my reproach among men that have each and all their friend, so they say ? I don't go about now wanting the fixed stars before my time, this world has not escaped me, thank God ; and—what other people say is the best of it may not escape me after all, though until so very lately I made up my mind to do without it."

When he made his first declaration, he told her later, he

believed her to be a helpless invalid who could never be a wife, as the world understands the relation ; all he had asked was to be allowed to place his devotion at her command, to be permitted to assume all the duties of a husband to one whom he believed to be a dying woman.

Miss Barrett asserts that she would not be justified in abetting him in a step which would be a wasting of his best feelings. She assures him that she believed his generous impulse would have expended itself in a week. "We must leave this subject . . . I must trust you to leave it without one word more."

To her serious letter he replies with the review of the circumstances of his early declaration. He takes the regard and esteem which she gives him with bowed head, but presses the question whether it is on his account that she bids him leave the subject ; he assures her that it is not ten, nor twenty years, since he began to look into his own life, and study its end and requirements.

"I know," he asserts, "if one may know anything, that to make that life yours and increase it by union with yours, would render me *supremely happy*, as I said, and say, and feel. . . . Tell me what I have a claim to hear. I can bear it, and be as grateful as I was before and am now—your friendship is my pride and happiness. If you told me your love was bestowed elsewhere, and that it was in your power to serve you *there*, to serve you there would still be my pride and happiness. . . . My whole scheme of life (with its wants, material wants at least, closely cut down) was long ago calculated—and it supposed you, the finding such an one as you, utterly impossible—because in calculating one goes upon *chances*, not on providence—how could I expect you? So for my own future way in the world I have always refused to care. Anyone who can live a couple of years and more on bread and potatoes as I did once on a time, and who prefers a blouse and blue shirt to all manner of gentlemanly appointments—such an one need not very much concern himself beyond considering the lilies how they grow. But now I see you near this life, all changes—and at a word, I will do all that ought to be done."

He feels that, penniless as he is, he could earn money, and relates that Charles Kean offered him £500 for a play

that suited him, and that Mr. Colburn " wanted more than his dinner a novel on Napoleon."

His friend replies that " never has any man been to my feelings what you are," but—

" But something worse than a sense of unworthiness God has put between us! and judge yourself if to beat your thoughts against the immovable marble of it, can be anything but pain and vexation of spirit, waste and wear of spirit to you—judge! The present is here to be seen speaking for itself! and the best future you can imagine for me, what a precarious thing it must be—a thing for making burdens out of—only not for your carrying, as I have vowed to my own soul. As dear Mr. Kenyon said to me to-day in his smiling kindness—' In ten years you may be strong perhaps—or almost strong'; that being the encouragement of my best friends,—and so if you are wise and would be happy (and you have excellent practical sense after all, and should exercise it) you must leave me—these thoughts of me, I mean—for if we might not be true friends for ever, I should have less courage to say the other truth. But we may be friends always—and cannot be so separated, that your happiness, in the knowledge of it, will not increase mine. And if you will be persuaded by me, as you say, you will be persuaded thus—and consent to take a resolution and force your mind at once into another channel."

The vital objection of her father's opposition to his children entertaining such feelings is urged as a second thought, and the letter concludes :

" In reply to some words of yours, you cannot despise the gold and gauds of the world more than I do, and should do even if I found a use for them." She confides the fact to him that she could not be poor if she wished it, as she has three or four hundred a year of which no living will could dispossess her. She assures her friend that she is grateful—" grateful enough to be truthful in all ways."

To this the poet replies in manly submission :

" Until you so see, and so inform me, I shall never utter a word—for that would involve the vilest of implications. I thank God, I do thank Him, that in this whole matter I have been, to the utmost of my power, not unworthy of His introducing you to me, in this respect that, being no longer in the

first freshness of life, and having for many years now made up my mind to the impossibility of loving any woman—having wondered at this in the beginning, and fought not a little against it, having acquiesced in it at last, and accounted for it all to myself, and become, if anything, rather proud of it than sorry—I say when real love, making itself at once recognised as such, *did* reveal itself to me at last, I *did* open my heart to it with a cry—not caring for its overturning all my theory,—nor mistrust its effect upon a mind set in ultimate order, so I fancied for the few years more—nor apprehend in the least that the new element would harm what was already organised without its help . . . and I repeat to you that I, with all to be thankful for to God, am most of all thankful for this the last of all His providences—your regard for me is *all* success—let the rest come or not come. . . . You will be the first to say to me, ‘ Such an obstacle has ceased to exist—or is now become impalpable to you, one you may try and overcome ’—and I shall be there, and ready—ten years hence as now—if alive.

“ One final word on the other matters—the ‘ worldly matters ’—I shall own I alluded to them rather ostentatiously, because—because that would be the one poor sacrifice I could make you—one I would cheerfully make, but a sacrifice and the only one: this careless ‘ sweet habitude of living ’—this absolute independence of mine, which if I had it not, my heart would starve and die—and this light rational life I lead, and know so well that I lead; this I would give up for nothing less than what you know—but I *would* give it up. . . . Till Thursday, then.”

But Thursday could not be; it must be Saturday. She has a headache and is weary at heart, and lays it upon her friend to avoid one subject which must lie where it fell. In the evening she sends a second letter to answer his renewed offer of devotion, to traverse the difficulties in the way of her acceptance of his proposal. She had done living, she thought, when he found her out. His interest in her had been wonderment to her. She is on such precarious ground in health and would not wrong his destiny with the care of one who is known as a confirmed invalid; her use may be just that she might pray for him—a sufficient end. The subject must be left untouched on Saturday, must be ignored henceforth.

But Saturday also proves impossible ; Monday it must be, unless hearing to the contrary. She writes sadly of her father's opposition to her wintering at Pisa, which has been suggested to avoid the English winter months. She has been advised that it was dangerous for her to have to bear the rigour of another winter in England.

She writes sadly now of this discussion with her father on the question of her wintering in Italy. She asks his advice about braving parental displeasure. He answers with a long letter. He sympathises with a father's pride and love in his child, his jealousy and vigilance in guarding his jewel, but in this instance guardianship means ruination. God, he writes, does not prescribe passive obedience in this life of probation—that is too easy ; exercise of faculty is necessary :

“Chop off your legs and you will never go astray ; stifle your reason altogether and you will find it difficult to reason ill. The partial indulgence, the proper exercise of one's faculties—there is the difficulty and problem for solution set by Providence—Providence which might have made the laws of Religion as indubitable as those of vitality. . . . There is no reward promised for the feat of breathing, and a great one for that of believing—consequently there must go a great deal more of voluntary effort to this latter.”

He reminds her that when he made his first offer of devotion he believed her suffering from incurable spinal complaint, and entirely dependent on her father. He now considers her to be in veriest slavery, and he who could free her from it scarcely dares to write of his devotion to her. He declares his dream to marry her, to come or go as she allowed, to be no more to her than one of her brothers : “It continues but a dream, but God bless my dearest E. B. B.”

Miss Barrett replies that still her answer must be the same. She cannot take advantage of such noble extravagance. His words make her happy ; she blesses him for this further proof of his attachment—they removed the

small bitternesses of her life. But now she feels profoundly touched. She will be his for everything but harm. If her illness frees her within a moderate time, she will then be to him whatever he may choose—friend or more than friend : it rests with God and him. But till then he is free ; he cannot dispel her belief that it would be better for him to forget her in one relation.

The plan of her wintering in Italy is much discussed by the brothers and sisters. George Barrett approaches his father on the subject ; Mr. Kenyon attempts his persuasions ; but, writes Miss Barrett : “ In this dead silence of Papa’s it all seems impossible.”

Mrs. Jameson would take her friend to Italy, devote herself to the care of her, but all plans fall fruitless, the subject drops : in September she writes, “ All is over with Pisa.” She has begged her father to assure her he is not displeased with her, but he would not. To go to Italy under her father’s displeasure was impossible ; she had braved it once by keeping her brother at Torquay—the brother who was drowned almost under her eyes.

To go to Italy without her father’s consent was impossible to her, and words had been said that could not easily be forgotten. She had urged that health for her seemed to depend upon wintering out of England ; his reply was that she could do as she liked—he washed his hands of her altogether. She is understood to be in disgrace ; her father’s evening visits have ceased. George Barrett has been told by his father that her going to Italy would be under his heaviest displeasure. Her only country allowed lay between the four walls of her room, she wrote, and all left to do was to be cheerful and hope for a mild winter.

Her lover is given the origin of her pet name, “ Ba”—short for Elizabeth—the name which, in the family’s use of it, wrote Miss Mitford, “ from their lips seemed like a caress.”

In one of her poems Miss Barrett pleads for tenderness

to it, the pet name given by the brother so tragically drowned at Torquay.

She did not like the name of Elizabeth, she wrote to Miss Mitford ; she was never called by it by anyone who loved her ; she would no more answer to it than her sisters would :

“ I have a name, a little name
 Uncadenced for the ear,
 Unhonoured by ancestral claim,
 Unsanctified by prayer and psalm,
 The solemn font anear.

“ My brother gave that name to me
 When we were children twain,
 When names acquired baptismally
 Were hard to utter as to see
 That life had any pain.

“ This name whoever chance to call
 Perhaps your smile may win.
Nay, do not smile ! mine eyelids fall
Over mine eyes, and feel withal
 The sudden tears within.

“ Nay, do not smile ! I hear in it
 What none of you can hear,—
The talk upon the willow seat,
The bird and wind that did repeat
 Around our human cheer.

“ I hear the birthday’s noisy bliss,
 My sisters’ woodland glee,—
My father’s praise, I did not miss,
When stooping down he cared to kiss
 The poet at his knee,—

“ And voices, which to name me, age
 Their tenderest tones were keeping—
To some I never more can say
An answer, till God wipes away
 In Heaven these drops of weeping.”

CHAPTER XI

ENGAGEMENT AND MARRIAGE OF ROBERT BROWNING AND ELIZABETH BARRETT

Circumstances become difficult in home of Miss Barrett—Father's temper terrifies her—No disclosure to him possible—Relations become difficult beyond endurance to the lovers—Secret marriage arranged for, September 12th, 1846—Departure for Italy, September 19th, 1846.

It proves very difficult to secure the once-a-week meeting. The privileged visitor, Cousin Kenyon, fixes a visit for Tuesday, so Wednesday must be substituted. He does not arrive on Tuesday, so Wednesday or Thursday may see him. A brother is feared to have an infectious fever, so another week must pass, she thinks. But her lover is not afraid of infectious fevers, and arrives to pay his weekly visit.

The good Kenyon is constantly in the way; offers, indeed, to put off a journey so as to be able to visit and cheer his cousin, who he notices is depressed.

Uneventful weeks pass. Winter must be patiently endured. An extra visit a week is suggested and emphatically resisted. If all were known, she writes, the visits would be stopped altogether. It is not her fault that she has to choose between loves. Twice a week occasionally, then, but no habit of it: he *must* understand—both had been carried too far, and there would be no reasoning with her father on discovery—only thunder.

There were both amusing and distressful things she could tell him of the parental habit. Once she might have thought she would be forgiven anything, but not now. But no fear need be felt of the other members of the

family ; suspicions might fall, but no information would be laid. And by a strange characteristic that one person never drew conclusions, suspected no danger till the thrust came ; and even if a suitor were a Prince of impeccable descent, with certificate of character from their chapel authorities, it would be the same. It is laughable, she writes, except when it brings weeping. Henrietta has a lover and bore the yoke. Her visitor, Captain Surtees Cook, comes casually, and openly and meekly hears the views of the head of the house concerning the obedience of children coupled with the word "marriage" : during which holding forth children silently vanish, leaving the visitor to plumb the question of filial dependence as a matter of mere curiosity.

Elizabeth Barrett was the only member of the family with an income of her own—a legacy left by an uncle of four hundred a year. But she was not allowed to control her money. She would have helped the brother so dear to her, but her hands were "seized and tied," and in the midst of her grief her brother was drowned, and her heart was broken with sorrow and remorse because she had braved her father's displeasure for once and kept this brother near her at Torquay in defiance of his wish.

There are allusions to bad health on her lover's side—persistent headaches, indispositions that interfere with the precious visits to 50, Wimpole Street. He writes recalling his first knowledge of her through her poems : how he wrote to her at first, on the whole, unwillingly, preferring, until he saw his name mentioned in her poem, to allow his admiration of her work to go the usual way in silence.

As for expecting what followed ! Why, he kept on with his scheme of getting done with England to go to his heart in Italy.

In January Miss Barrett is so much better in health that she writes of having walked downstairs into the drawing-room : walked, mind ! Although it is January,

and she has always been carried before to keep her from the draughts.

It was a warm January; she felt so well. The family were as astonished as if she had walked out of the window. Kind brother Sturmie had broken through his bashfulness and awkwardness to say how pleased he was to see her down.

By May her recovered health is a thing to exult over. She sends in a letter a wonderful thing—a piece of laburnum gathered by her as she walked in Regent's Park—"We shall walk together under the trees."

And such strange phantoms people looked to her after her long seclusion in that dark back-room, so wonderful it all was, so unreal she felt among them—the idea of him and herself was her only grip on reality.

In June she is so well that she goes visiting : "Not first to Mr. Kenyon, as would be supposed," she writes, but to her old nurse Miss Trepsack—"Treppy," who had nursed them all, and their father before them—she had full right to the first visit paid.

Then she goes for a drive in the carriage which is waiting to take her sister Henrietta to a party. She and Arabel and Flush had a turn together! "How unexpected to see people walking about the streets again!"

Sunday, June 6th, finds her writing a letter in the drawing-room, the first piece of writing out of her room for five years. During the week she drives to see her old tutor, Mr. Boyd, who was blind. The visit was in the nature of an experiment. He was not really old, but nervous and infirm, refusing to move from his upstair rooms; a scholar still adding the study of Ossian to Greek. "He has no sensibilities, would perhaps sleep a little sounder after news of her death; for instance, when he felt sorry, he used to say he just felt inclined to go to sleep."

Then a card is left on Mr. Kenyon on her way to another visit to Mr. Boyd, who lived in St. John's Wood.

She feels nervous, but her sisters rally her and the visit is paid.

Another visit is paid to the outside world by Miss Barrett. This time to the Paddington Chapel, to hear her friend Mr. Stratton preach. He was a man of divine character, she wrote, and she would like to have consulted him in her difficulties and perplexities, but felt it would be wronging her sisters, who, if her father discovered, it would deprive her sister Arabel of communicating with him or of attending his church, which would have been a serious loss to her.

Her improved health now brings the problem of visitors, who, one and all, must be kept in ignorance that she knew anything personally of Browning.

There was her old friend Miss Mitford, who had been her only visitor for so long, who would certainly be very unsympathetic to the new situation of things.

A Miss Bayley had been desperately anxious to take Miss Barrett to Italy if the father's consent could have been secured : from her the position must be concealed at all cost.

There was Mrs. Jameson, true and useful friend, who in the end was taken into their confidence to the extent of the admission that her friend had a secret ; she was allowed to guess its nature.

Mr. Kenyon was the most serious difficulty. To tell him was impossible, to deceive him very repugnant, but for his own sake it had to be done. His visits were frequent ; he was suspicious, he put difficult questions to the sisters downstairs. Browning himself was disposed to give him his confidence, but Miss Barrett knew her cousin better—he could not stand a severe test, this good quixotic cousin, so anxious to help everyone. It was *her* secret, she reminds her lover.

There is an invasion of relations from the country. Aunt Hedley is about during the day and makes awkward remarks at dinner. She had not seen "Ba" all day,

she said, and, to her astonishment, when she went into her room a gentleman was sitting there.

"Mr. Browning called," faltered Arabel.

"And," went on Aunt Hedley, "'Ba' signed to me as if she meant me not to go in."

"Oh," exclaimed Henrietta, "*that* must be a mistake—perhaps she really meant you to go in."

"You should have gone in and seen the poet," said Mr. Barrett, for he was proud of his daughter's acquaintance with Browning, and grudging permission had been given for occasional visits—"but only once in a while."

He was now almost the old playful papa again, wrote Miss Barrett; called her his puss and his love. If she were only strong enough to put the case before him now. But it was impossible—she dreaded the result: they would be certainly separated; all power of choice would be taken from her; writing would be prohibited; meetings disallowed.

She was not strong enough for the storm certain to follow, she wrote; her father's angry voice would stretch her into a faint. Her temperament was too nervous for disclosures. Positive disobedience to orders would be more racking than the unauthorised disobedience of secret marriage: her terror blinds her—God must direct for the best.

The father's affectionate manner lasts but a short time. There was a terrific thunderstorm one day in August, which prevented Browning leaving the house at the usual time, and Mr. Barrett by some chance arrived home earlier than usual. Miss Barrett knew there was storm gathering in her father's breast in the room below.

Before going in to dinner he went into her room. She was lying in a loose wrap, exhausted with the strain she had been through.

"Have you been dressed like this all day?" was the angry question.

"No; only just now—the heat was so trying."

"That *man*," he replied, with grave displeasure, "has spent the whole day with you, it appears."

"He meant to go several times—the rain prevented him."

The interview left Miss Barrett so nervous and unstrung that the visits must be discontinued for at least a week, she wrote.

Serious plans for a secret marriage are now discussed. It must not be suspected by a soul: that much has been made clear by the father's angry outburst. Wilson, Miss Barrett's maid, must be the only confidante—she could be trusted absolutely; they would take her away with them, and, as a matter of fact, Miss Barrett could not put together the necessary clothes for herself, much more get herself out of the house without a soul knowing.

The storm would be terrible, she wrote; whoever helped would have to suffer. Wilson must be taken for her own sake—and dear little Flush, too.

September is fixed upon; it would be too cold later. But there is much to think of, much to arrange. And there is the money question to be grappled with. Browning is remorseful at his failure as a money-getter; he is mortified and humiliated that he is absolutely penniless.

He had proposed a scheme of studying law. This Miss Barrett had incontinently disposed of—there is her income, she asserts.

This galls him: he insists upon a legal document being drawn up for the reversion of Miss Barrett's money to her sisters in the event of her death. This quixotic idea was passionately opposed by Miss Barrett, and in the end she had her way.

In the end the family of Browning shared the secret that this great change had come in his life. This he insisted upon. Why should his mother and father not know? Why should he wound them to the heart, they who since childhood had denied him nothing that their

love and means could compass? To end by deception would break their hearts.

Browning's love and gratitude to his parents amounted to a passion. In his letters is described the deep kindness of his father, who would cloak a self-sacrificing action with "cheerful absurdities about inclination."

He recalls his father's ungrudging generosity in paying for the publication of his poems, his whole-souled furtherance of his achievements although apparently at a hopeless loss.

The fact that his marriage was only possible because Miss Barrett had an income of her own pressed upon him sorely, and he had to accept a loan of a hundred pounds from his father for the expenses of the marriage.

Marriage, he wrote to Miss Barrett, had never seemed possible to him, because he could not marry where he did not love. He had loved the prolonged relation of childhood in his home, and at thirty-three he was confronted with the fact, never before contemplated, that the responsibility of maintaining a home was upon him.

"This disregard as to money must cease," he writes. "As to my copyrights, I never meant to sell them . . . even in their present disadvantageous form, without advertisement and unnoticed by the influential journals do somehow manage to pay their expenses. I have had one direct offer to print a new edition. . . . Smith and Elder, for instance, wrote to offer to print any poem about Italy in any form, with any amount of advertisements, on condition of sharing profits.

"I desire to live and just write out certain things which are in me, and so save my soul. I would endeavour to do this if I were forced to live among lions, as you once said—but I should best do this if I lived quietly with myself and with you. I shall do all—under your eyes and with your hand in mine—all I was intended to do. I mean to write wondrous works—and sell them too—and out of it all may easily come some fifty or sixty horrible pounds a year, on which one lives famously at Ravenna, they say.

"The fact is, not having really cared about anything except not losing too much money, I have taken very little care of my concerns that way."

From his father the hundred pounds was received as a loan, to be paid back out of his first literary earnings. "I told you," he wrote, "they believe me . . . therefore know in some measure what you are to be."

Miss Barrett calculates that she could with scarcely an effort make a hundred a year by magazine contributions :

" . . . May God help us," she writes, "and smooth the way before and behind. May your father indeed be able to love me a little, for *my* father will never love me again."

"I hope and believe," replies Browning, "that by your side I shall accomplish something to justify God's goodness and yours—and looking at the matter in a worldly light, I see not a few reasons for thinking that unproductive as the kind of literature may be, which I aim at producing, yet by judicious management I shall be able to realise an annual sum quite sufficient for every purpose—at least in Italy."

In 1856 kind Cousin Kenyon placed the poets beyond money anxieties by leaving them a legacy of eleven thousand pounds. He had also assisted them from the birth of their child with the gift of a hundred pounds a year.

A new leaf of life is felt to be ready awaiting the turning; trustful drifting with the stream is over; any day may bring some crisis to force the situation.

Italy is decided upon; the means for the flight are provided. The step must be taken before October, with its cold mornings and dark evenings; the beginning of the dreaded winter would "cry out at their folly." If unable to take the plunge now, they must "wait till next autumn, and the next, and the next, if necessary"; but if she could prepare herself for it, let it be the end of September. He would use no arguments to coerce; but to take her away in winter, and should anything irretrievably happen to her health—what would his fate of remorse be at allowing the summer to slip away? There would be no fate for him but to "live and die in some corner where the English language was never heard in comment on my wretched imbecility."

The reply brings a remonstrance. What reason had she given him to thus doubt her willingness to take the extreme step with him? She could understand . . . in self-respect he would be justified in abandoning the whole thing. She could not complain at that, but she had a right to protest against the imputation cast upon her *bona fides* over the secret marriage proposal. In July she had promised to go in August instead of September, if suitable—she made no difficulties; he himself had replied that “October or November would do as well.”

Is he just, she pleads, to doubt her willingness to complete the engagement? Can she help it—these painful home circumstances? Did she not prophesy they must be painful? No one could know who had not felt the pricks. She could quote Prometheus, but has no heart for quotations now: she would only say she has never wavered from her promise, and will fulfil it within a week if he choose . . . if September be possible, so let it be. She is not angry at his reproaches and doubts, though he has been hard on her, who gives up all her world at the holding up of his finger . . . she kisses the dear finger-tips all the same, and is ready whosoever *it* shall be ready.

The position is “horrible,” she allows, and may not be disguised with his gifts of roses, his thoughts of her—worse situation to her than to him, for what is painful arrives to him but once a week, presses upon her continually. To hear the voice of her father shrivels her up, to meet his eye makes her shrink; to talk to her brothers leaves her unnerved and shaken; even the sympathy of her sisters turns to sorrow under the fear of what they may have to suffer through it.

The decision had to be faced with startling swiftness.

On September 9th Miss Barrett writes, in great agitation, that an edict has gone forth from her father that the house is to be left for a month for cleaning purposes. One of her brothers is commanded to take a house at Dover—

Reigate—anywhere ; they were to settle it among themselves. They were merely to go without delay.

"What can be done?" she writes. She leaves it to him to think and decide.

Quick, short, decisive comes the answer : the marriage must take place immediately—he will get the licence to-day. The marriage could take place on the 12th. Send a ring as measure for the wedding-ring.

He is making arrangements with a friend to be at the church on Saturday—they can arrange further at their meeting next day. "You must write short notes to the necessary persons. You will not fail me. The marriage over, your preparations for leaving may be made quickly. All information will be given to-morrow."

The same evening comes Miss Barrett's reply : she has but one word, one will—that is, his. "But do nothing precipitately," she begs. They are not to go on Monday ; her brother has merely gone to enquire about accommodation for them, means simply to go to Reigate. The ring for her measure will be given him the next day on his call—will be safer than sending it. He has not mentioned his own health—she is anxious for him. She will not fail him—his decision shall be hers—she gave herself to him long ago. Though he generously hints at her right to draw back, she sends another affirmation for her own sake. She is to be alone next day—all the others are going to holiday make at Richmond ; they will be quite alone.

The meeting took place next day, plans were arranged for the marriage on Saturday.

Miss Barrett and her maid Wilson left the house quietly on Saturday morning, September 12th, and arriving at Marylebone Church were met by Browning and two of his friends. The marriage ceremony was over in half an hour ; then bride and bridegroom parted at the church door—she to go back to her home for a week till the departure from England could be arranged for.

At one o'clock the bridegroom writes to his bride from his home at New Cross.

He writes to sustain the trembling woman, to assure her of his love ; repeats the homage of his feeling, so deep that it cannot express itself. His professions seem to fall short of the requirements of the situation. In every feature of the past acquaintance she has been "entirely perfect." His only desire was to keep her love, and the persistent note of faith all through the correspondence rises : confidence that God had raised up this friend for him and faith in this power to retain it to him. She had given him the highest mark of her confidence—faith in him, the supreme faith one human being could vest in another. He was deeply grateful, and supremely proud that his life should be so crowned by her love. That God would bless her, he prays as her very own now. She must take all care of the life that was his now, and regain composure somehow. And please thank Wilson for him.

At half-past four the bride writes her account of the return to her home.

Just a word to reassure him that the day has not slain her. She went to Mr. Boyd's from the church, so allowing Wilson to get home quickly with the information required as to where she was.

Mr. Boyd was happily engaged with someone. She rested on his sofa downstairs, had some wine and food, and at last the two sisters came, "with such grave faces." They had missed her and Wilson—were anxious and frightened. Their remarks hinted their fears, met by the trembling sister by evasions of what nonsense they were saying, and to reassure them they went for a drive to Hampstead Heath. She was feeling prostrated—had not slept all the night before ; was so weak on starting for the church, had had to call at a chemist's for a restorative. She had assured Wilson of their gratitude ; she was very kind to her, and had never shrunk at what was before her. As she and her sisters drove past Marylebone Church on

their way home her sight clouded—pray his mother, she begs, to forgive her: but that the bride was herself his mother might have been at her son's wedding. And if any harm is to come to anyone for what they have done, she prays it may fall on her.

A difficult day has to be got through on Sunday. The brothers and sisters gather in the drawing-room and laugh and talk over the scheme of the visit to the seaside. Some women friends from the country called; also Treppy, the old nurse, extracting a promise from her to go and see her next day.

Then, after she had escaped to her own room, came Mr. Kenyon with his searching question as to when she had seen Browning last. With quick evasion she had been able to say he was there on Friday. On going away he put another question as to when she was to see Browning again, to which she could truthfully reply she did not know.

Would he beg forgiveness of her from his father and mother? She feels like a trespasser over their garden wall. And she had so hated having to take her wedding-ring off—he would have to put it on again for her.

With God's help, he replies, he will spend his life trying to give proof of his affection for her, and begs for information as to how to set about the approach to her father. He is prepared to make any "conceivable submission" to preserve her from the loss of his affection. Would his personal supplication be any use? Should he write? To Mr. Kenyon he would write, and thanks God that his life has borne flower and fruit so—his is a glorious life, for which he thanks God and her.

And he draws her attention to the Hand over it all. How this marriage of theirs was forced as they hesitated, was now done, and well done. How the precipitation simplified things—every moment of his life brought proof of the intervention of Providence.

"Dearest," is the terrified reply—"no letter must be

sent till I am out of hearing of the reply. Tell no one till we are away—till the last moment.” She would be “killed”—oh, it would be worse than he could possibly dream.

And is there any danger of the newspapers giving information? Oh, she is paralysed at the thought of writing this news to her father. He will not only be angry. She will be cast out once and for ever. She remembers his praise of her for her freedom from love affairs—his faith will be gone—all women will drop in his estimation because of her. She would put herself under his feet to be forgiven a little. He has great qualities, and she has been a sufferer from life so long—she will entreat him to remember that and pardon her this new affection. He would perhaps only answer, better that she had died long ago.

Arrangements are made for leaving by a boat starting from Southampton at nine o’clock the following Saturday evening.

“My whole life,” writes her husband, “shall be spent in trying to furnish such a proof of *my* affection; such a perfect proof,—and perhaps vainly spent—but I will endeavour with God’s help.”

During the whole week no visit was paid by Browning, his utterly truthful lips refusing the lie of having to ask for “Miss Barrett”; in chivalrous wont he spared the harassed bride further anxiety so.

Everything is arranged by letter; an advertisement of their marriage arranged for insertion after their flight. Luggage is attended to by Wilson. The anxious man will be at Hodgson’s, close at hand to 50, Wimpole Street; a cab will take them thence to the station.

One effort more, he writes, and may his return for it all make up for the strange failure of her father’s towards her.

“Pray for me to-night,” is the reply of the trembling bride—“pray for me and love me that I may have courage, feeling, both.”

One of Miss Barrett's early poems is addressed "To Flush, my Dog," who was the one intimate companion of Miss Barrett's invalid life. He was a spaniel, the gift of Miss Mitford. Around him her crushed affections twined—a gentle creature, ever at her side, watching unweariedly beside her sick-couch, responsive to her every movement, lying lovingly in dumb sympathy all day long, as the poem describes.

The poem describes his silken beauty, his golden clear hazel eyes, the sportiveness, yet unwearied watchfulness, only satisfied when the thin delicate hand of his mistress stroked the sleek brown curls.

"Therefore to this dog will I
Tenderly, not scornfully,
Render praise and favour:
With my hand upon his head,
Is my benediction said,
Therefore and for ever.

"And because he loves me so,
Better than his kind will do
Often, man or woman,
Give I back more love again
Than dogs often take of men,
Leaning from my Human."

And in September Miss Barrett had dreadful news to tell. Her dear Flush had been stolen—dog-stealers were pests of society in 1846.

A ransom was offered. The chief of the confederacy of dog-stealers called upon Henry Barrett to tell him that the society had the little dog in Whitechapel. They required ten pounds for him.

Miss Barrett is prostrated with grief. There was a dreadful story current of a lady refusing this dog-stealing blackmail, who had received her dog's head home in a parcel. Oh, there must be no haggling, no delay; she must have her faithful Flush back! In the end she went to the society in Whitechapel herself, paying the ransom demanded.

Browning's robust spirit rebelled at any compromise with dog-stealers; they should be defied, hunted down, tracked, and exterminated. To pay blackmail and encourage further blackmail defeated justice—and what about owners who couldn't pay? he wrote.

But all the same, in this case he would have given all he was worth to get poor Flush back again, he added.

His theory sounds well, writes Flush's mistress, but suppose bandits in Italy carried *her* off, sending one of her ears to back their blackmail up with—would he poise on abstract principles then, waiting for the other ear, as happened in Portugal not so long ago?

Flush is safely back again, is delighted, reminds her that it was really imprudent to go to those disgusting wretches herself.

So Flush must share the flight with his mistress, which made the situation more difficult.

On September 19th, Mrs. Browning and her maid Wilson, carrying the little dog Flush, stole out of 50, Wimpole Street, while the family were at dinner.

Robert Browning was at the place appointed—a bookseller's shop near by.

The journey was made to Southampton to catch the night boat to Havre; thence they travelled by train to Paris.

Here they met Mrs. Jameson—one of the few literary friends of Mrs. Browning—by fortunate chance, apparently, although she had been allowed to assume the secret of the poets, and that a secret marriage alone was possible. From Paris they travelled by easy stages to Pisa, and onwards to Florence, where their home was made. Here for fifteen years they lived and worked in that perfect union they had projected; here their only child, a son, was born; here Mrs. Browning wrote and fashioned by her poetry, as the inscription on “Casa Guidi,” their home, expresses it, “a golden ring between Italy and England.”

Mr. Barrett never forgave the marriage, never saw his daughter again, nor mentioned her name; her letters were returned to her unopened.

On March 9th, 1849, a son was born. A few days after, Browning's mother died; she did not live to hear of the birth of her grandchild: the end came unexpectedly. Of the sudden shock from joy at their child's birth to the profound grief at his mother's death, Mrs. Browning writes:

" My husband has been in the deepest anguish, and indeed, except for the courageous consideration of his sister, who wrote two letters of preparation, saying 'she was not well' and 'she was very ill,' when in fact all was over, I am frightened to think what the result would have been to him. He has loved his mother as such passionate natures only can love, and I never saw a man so bowed down in an extremity of sorrow—never. . . .

" Poor little babe, who was too much rejoiced over at first, fell away by a most natural recoil (even I felt it to be *most natural*) from all that triumph, but Robert is still very fond of him, and goes to see him bathed every morning, and walks up and down on the terrace with him in his arms."—*From Mrs. Browning to Miss Browning.*

" My own strength has wonderfully improved, just as my medical friends prophesied—and it seems like a dream when I find myself able to climb the hills with Robert, and help him to lose himself in the forests. I have performed a great exploit—ridden on a donkey five miles deep into the mountains to an almost inaccessible volcanic ground not far from the stars. Robert on horseback, and Wilson and the nurse (with baby) on other donkeys—guides, of course. . . . You can scarcely image to yourself the retired life we live, or how we have retreated from the kind advances of the English society here."—*From Letters to Miss Mitford.*

Mr. Story describes Browning at this time as

" black-haired, small eyes wide apart, which he twitches constantly together, a smooth face, a slightly aquiline nose, and manners nervous and rapid. He has a great vivacity, but not the least humour, some sarcasm, considerable critical faculty, and very great frankness and friendliness of manner and mind. . . . Very unaffected and pleasant and simple-hearted is Mrs. Browning, and Browning says 'her poems are the least good part of her.' "—*March 21st, 1849.*

The love story of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett is embalmed in Mrs. Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese": how love strove with death, and broke the doom pronounced on her by doctors and assented to by the family. Her recovery and emergence to life, its duties and enjoyments, is the romance of the letters of 1845-46.

"What are you writing?" wrote Browning to Miss Barrett during the correspondence.

"Did Paul work at his tent-making after his vision?" is the evasive reply. "Does not Solomon say that there is a time to read what is written? But you shall see some day at Pisa, what I will not show you now."

"I thought once how Theocritus had sung
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years,
Who each one in a gracious hand appears
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:
And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years, . . .
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung
A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware,
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;
And a voice said in mastery while I strove, . . .
'Guess now who holds thee?'—'Death!' I said. But,
there,
The silver answer rang, . . . 'Not Death, but Love.'"

Sonnets from the Portuguese, I.

One of Miss Barrett's letters of 1846 records a visit paid to Westminster Abbey. The music affected her profoundly, she wrote, and "the sight of it all so grand, as if time were turned to stone." She stood where the poets were laid; her emotion overpowered her.

Had the poetess any prevision that she herself would be offered a last resting-place there when he to whom she was writing was to be brought to the sacred corner amid national mourning, to be laid to rest among his peers to the solemn chanting of her own hymn?—

“ ‘ Sleep soft, beloved ! ’ we sometimes say,
 But have no tune to charm away
 Sad dream that through the eyelids creep ;
 But never doleful dream again
 Shall break the happy slumber when
 He giveth His beloved sleep.’ ”

The promise to disclose the work she was engaged upon during the correspondence was fulfilled by Mrs. Browning, as related by her husband in a letter, which was written in answer to a friendly enquiry of Robert Browning on March 10th, 1881, quoted by his son (Sept. 1st, 1905) in the Preface for the “ Sonnets ” published in Florence :

“ The ‘ Sonnets ’ were only known to exist and seen for the first time by the person to whom they were addressed, two or three years after the writer’s marriage. The reticency came of some misunderstood remark which seemed to doubt the depth and sincerity of such feelings so exhibited in verse. Fortunately some other long subsequent conversation did more justice to an exceptional case, and the next morning the writer said : ‘ Do you know I once wrote some verses to you ? ’ This was at the Bagni di Lucca after the birth of her child a few months before. The poems were only printed at my urgent entreaty. I consider that the poor fancy that I might seem too anxious for my own self-glorification, as people would perhaps suppose, ought not to prevail against all that power and beauty—however unworthy the subject they had been bestowed upon.”

“ It may perhaps be mentioned here that the writer of the ‘ Sonnets ’ was sometimes playfully called by him ‘ his little Portuguese ’ in connection with her poem ‘ Catarina to Camoens ’; hence the title chosen, which when the ‘ Sonnets ’ were published afforded a veil, however slight, to conceal the identity of the author.”

In 1846 Miss Barrett alone of contemporaries divined the full genius of Browning : divined the dual nature of the poet and his poetry. Browning, “ King of the Mystics,” she wrote to Miss Mitford : Browning the Humanitarian, whose poetry, “ if cut deep down the middle shows a heart within blood-tinctured of a veined humanity,” she wrote in her poem, “ Lady Geraldine’s

Courtship." And in the "Sonnets" written in her seclusion of suffering in the dark back-room of 50, Wimpole Street, she stepped out into the Empyrean with him, and took her stand beside those already immortalised and crowned that her Vision had known :

" My poet, thou canst touch on all the notes
God set between His After and Before,
And strike up and strike off the general roar
Of the rushing worlds, a melody that floats
In a serene air purely. Antidotes
Of medicated music, answering for
Mankind's forlornest uses, thou canst pour
From thence into their ears. God's will devotes
Thine to such ends, and mine to wait on thine !
How, Dearest, wilt thou have me for most use ?
A hope, to sing by gladly ? . . . or a fine
Sad memory, with thy songs to interfuse ? . . .
A shade, in which to sing . . . of palm or pine ?
A grave, on which to rest from singing ? . . . Choose."

Sonnets from the Portuguese, XVII.

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